

ギャングスター

13

Death of anosmic stray dogs
鼻の利かない野良犬の死に様

河端ジュン一

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Gangsta: Death of Anosmic Stray Dogs

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Prologue

My living with him had lasted for 2 weeks and 1 day.

About what I expected it to last, all things considered. I didn't know nor did ever really want to know more about myself, but I did sense that this body of mine was about to die.

To be exact, the medical opinion was that I had 2 weeks left, so you could say I was given an entire extra day to live. Given by whom? That, I didn't know either, nor did I want to know, for that matter.

But in any case, it was on that extra day that I had decided to place a certain request with them.

*

Backstreets were always wet.

With saliva, blood, semen, tears, vomit, excreta, cheap whiskey from cracked bottles, and all kinds of other stale liquids the main streets wanted to hide away. Stuffed and littered with those things, back alleys were always wrapped in that humid atmosphere.

On that night, right cheek pushed against damp paving, I tried to breathe as quietly as possible. I, too, made a contribution to the moist air around, wetting the back alley with the blood from my nose.

At the time, I was thinking that I would part with my life before the sun was up tomorrow's morning. I didn't feel especially sad about it. Dying unknown to anyone in some nameless back alley no different from any other anywhere else, was not an entirely bad end to a life. At least it was more normal than any other end my imagination could paint.

I closed my eyes.

Maybe I dozed off for a while or simply couldn't feel the flow of time properly with my head so hazy, I didn't really know. Either way, just as I was about to let my dimming consciousness slip away, I heard a voice that forced me to drag it

back.

"Hey, young lady. You'll catch a cold if you sleep in a place like this?"

I gave an involuntary shiver. Even my best case death scenario — as little as that 'best' was — was not to be granted to me, huh?

Even my eyelashes felt heavy like lead. When I managed to pry my eyelids open with difficulty, what I saw was a man's face.

That face, the left eye sporting an eyepatch, was unfamiliar. And you always gotta be wary of unfamiliar faces. But then again, seeing a familiar face would only plunge me into depths of despair, so it was better that way.

To me, there was only one person I could trust. Only one person in this whole world. If it wasn't him, then it was all the same from there. Gotta resist.

What, still, even now?

Now, what was happening sure more resembled a comedy than a tragedy at that point, but I still folded my arms that hurt like they were coming clean off, and crawled, dragging my body that positively felt as heavy as a cloth bag thoroughly soaked in water, away. I writhed on the stone pavement, my mind urging me to put some distance between myself and this man, even if it was just another few inches.

"Oh come on, no need to be so on edge. I don't know what happened to you, but it's OK, I won't bite." The man's voice, too, was moist.

The 10 inches I, enduring the violent pain, managed to put between him and myself he closed with half a step, rendering my effort futile. With my body falling apart like that, I had nowhere to escape. As the barest means of resistance still available to me, I settled for lifting my chin and glowering at him. And that's when I had the first really good look at his face.

Long ash blond hair, messy at the back. Through part of it hanging down his cheek you could see the moonlight. Pretty, was my honest impression. That said, it wasn't like his hair being pretty was going to help me any, of course.

"It's just that it's gonna be a problem if I let you die here. Bad for business. This is right in front of my shop, you see."

It was hard to tell if there was malice underlying that superficially smiling face with a 5 o'clock shadow. While I was busy trying to determine if there was, his right arm sneaked under my thighs.

"Ah," I could only yelp as I was gathered up in his arms like some old useless rag.

Trying to twist my body, I clawed at his neck. My index and middle fingers did succeed in piercing his skin, drawing blood. Said blood looked black in the moonlight.

It had to hurt, but his expression didn't change. He still wore that light smile, like nothing had happened.

"What are you planning to do with me?" I asked, not forgetting to glare daggers at him.

He stared at me wide-eyed, as if in surprise. A heartbeat later, he smiled.

"Hee, ain't your voice cute."

"Answer."

He started walking, carrying me as he was in his arms. Slowly but with big steps.

"Don't make me out more cruel than I am. I'm Worick. And who are you?"
"What do you want from me?"

The man who introduced himself as Worick sighed and smiled again.

"For starters, I want to move you away from my shop's front door."
"Then you've moved me far enough already. Now, let me go."
"I can't exactly just dump you on other people's doorstep either, now can I. Besides, young lady, your voice is really charming. I wanna talk to you a bit more."

His intentions were beyond deciphering. If he just wanted to kill me, surely he could've done so already.

Did the Family request this man to capture me alive? If so, it was strange that he didn't bother to restrain me, or at least prepare a car or something. In the first place, he didn't so much as point a gun at me, how absurd was that?

I positively sucked at this kind of games. I didn't have nearly enough experience for it. But at the same time, showing weakness was also out of question.

I gulped down the accumulated saliva. And immediately dreaded he heard it. Gotta say something.

"Alright, then show me to your shop."

If nothing, avoiding being brought back to the Family was the priority. If I was up only against this one man, maybe I could still run away somehow. If I rested for a bit and got my limbs move like I wanted them to for at least 5 seconds, it could still work out.

His gait showed no sign of stopping as he peered down at me. His face, dark when backlit by the moonlight, wore a carefree smile.

"But of course. After the date, that is."

I admit that for a second I watched the expression on his face in a fascinated daze. Except when I relaxed in his arms, it was more because of my body hitting the limit of how much exhaustion it could take than anything else.

I decided to let myself simply rest for a couple of minutes. Some of my strength would return, and I would try to shake his arms off.

The moment I had settled on that course of action, my eyelids felt unbearably heavy, and I shut them close. Drowsiness enveloped me. No way, you can't, my spirit still tried to resist. Except I still did end up falling asleep in the arms of a complete stranger. I could only curse my own childishness.

In the dark, all I could feel was the warmth of his arms and his scent. He smelled of women's perfume. And not of one kind either. Numerous, countless. They all mingled on this man's body and soaked into his skin. Somehow, it was a smell that brought sadness.

Sinking deep into the murky swampy waters of sleep, I remembered something. When Worick smiled, it wasn't my face that he was looking at. It was the plain old metal tag hanging around my neck and laying on my chest.

*

I didn't see any dreams.

The next time when my consciousness resurfaced, I found myself lying on a snow-white sheet on a simple but clean bed. The morning sun I had never expected to see again was shining through the window and I even heard the chirping of a wagtail.

I also felt surprisingly good, which confused the hell out of me. Sure, my head still ached with the grating, creaking kind of pain, but when I tried to lift my arm, it moved, and when I repeated the same with my leg, it did, too. I took a very deep breath and let it out. If this kept up, maybe my body would hold out for 2 more weeks. That was the hunch I got.

As previously, I wasn't restrained with anything. In the room, a few more beds were lined up, but no one else was around. I had a thought that if I acted now, maybe I could run away, but at the same time a certain realization dawned on me. At the very least, this place had no connection of any sort to the Family. There was no way the Family that had me working for them would have something like clean white bedsheets. In which case, it was hard to imagine a place that could be safer than this one.

Without anything that had to be done and without any ideas on what I wanted to do, I simply stared at the ceiling.

After a long while, I heard talking voices coming from the base of the stairs found in the corner of the room. They were quiet, but I could hear them just fine.

"Nothing really can be done?" That voice belonged to that man, Worick.
"Nothing. I've detected the signs of regular use of Celebrier with illegally high concentration. You can't really tell from her appearance but her organs are all pretty much decayed." This voice was unfamiliar. A low calm voice of a man.

"I see. Thank you, as always."

"Next time bring me someone who isn't a corpse."

"But she's still alive."

"Let me paraphrase then: someone who actually has half a chance to get better."

"Mn, 'kay, will do."

With that, the conversation had ended. One of them — hard to tell which — sighed. One set of footsteps ascended the stairs.

For a second, my fingers closed around the tag on my chest.

By all rights, I wasn't human. Legally speaking, a sub-species of humankind, but still a being different from a Normal. A Twilight, as they called us.

Footsteps were coming closer, and I shut my eyes close. The sound of them climbed the stairs, resounded against the floor of the room and stopped at my bedside.

I figured from the smell that the person standing there was Worick. He didn't make an attempt to speak up.

Annoyed, I opened my eyes again.

"Did I wake you?" Worick was smiling the same superficial smile as yesterday. I nodded. "What's this place?" I asked next.

"A clinic. Run by a middle-aged grumpypants named Theo for a living, although he barely scraps by. But he's not one to rat it out to mean jealous adults if you bring a charming girl here."

"Do I look like a girl to you?"

It was a question out of pure curiosity. When I looked in the mirror, the youngest I'd give the face reflected there was 30.

Worick cocked his head to the side slightly.

"Your voice sounds like a young girl's. And your face looks like a girl's who's barely reached the threshold of adulthood."

That put a sarcastic smile on my lips. It was like realizing that the outside didn't match the inside and being pointed out just that.

"How are you feeling?"

"Not bad. Strangely enough."

"Good to hear. Then let's go. I got the discharge permission for you from the doc."

"Go'? Where?"

"To my office. I promised to show it to you yesterday, remember?"

Now that I thought about it, true, we talked about something like that yesterday.

Planting my right hand on the bedsheet, I was able to get up somehow. Worick tried to help me, but I ignored him and planted my feet on the floor. But when I made an attempt to rise up and stand on them, sharp pain exploded in my head, making me involuntary groan. Unable to comply further, my body folded in two, collapsing.

I braced myself, fully expecting to hit the floor, but before I did, Worick had propped me. He gathered me in his arms once again, just like yesterday. It was driven home to me then that the very thought of my getaway being somehow possible was but an illusion.

"You're simply tired, young lady. You shouldn't push yourself too much right now. You'll get better in no time."

I smiled despite myself. It had been a long time since I was able to smile like that.

"Liar."

"Wh-Why...?"

"I was awake earlier."

Although coming from someone as broken as myself, it was a fact that Twilights' physical abilities were off the scale. Eavesdropping on a conversation taking place downstairs was nothing.

Worick didn't say anything, simply started walking slowly. When he spoke up, it was in a soft voice, much like concentrated soup the chef spent hours on cooking properly.

"Young lady, what is your name?"

"Name?"

"Yeah, since you didn't let me know yesterday."

I didn't ask back to hear a reason like what he gave me. The information about me was engraved on the tag on my chest after all, with my name obviously being the first line on it.

With a long sigh that wasn't really a sigh, I answered, "Sophia".

That was one thing — and nearly the only thing — that was my own. The only something properly belonging to me aside from the body that couldn't really move anymore and the pain residing in my head.

"Nice to meet you, Sophia," Worick said.

Like a stray dog on the verge of dying finding an owner just before passing away, or like a tragedy with one act of tranquil lull before the inevitable woeful ending, my life with him had started from that morning on.

*

There is nothing much I could tell about the 2 weeks I spent with him.

As a matter of fact, I was mostly bedridden on the compact bed in the bedroom, so I couldn't even figure out his office's layout accurately. He was courteous enough to make me pasta, but due to the constant headache that was getting only worse by the day I couldn't taste it properly.

There was another person in that office, called Nicolas. A black-haired man of Asian descent with beast-sharp eyes. He wasn't by any means tall, but to me that solidly built body looked like an exquisite finely chiseled sculpture of a warrior carved out of solid rock. Worick addressed him as 'Nic' or 'partner'.

I sensed from the first glance that Nicolas wasn't a Normal. You could tell birds of feather by the smell somehow, and there wasn't even any need to see the tags hanging around his neck to confirm it. That man apparently held no slightest interest in me, so till the end we'd never exchanged any words with him.

Often times, Worick would be summoned somewhere, and when he came back, he would be clad in a coating of women's perfume. I couldn't bring myself to warm up to that smell no matter how I tried, and that was the only unpleasant detail during those 2 weeks I spent next to him.

Summarily, my last days could be described like this: *for the last stretch of her miserable life, Sophia was granted a peaceful bedroom, where she fell asleep with eternal sleep happy.*

If there was something missing in this description, it would be the request that I placed on the fifteenth day of my stay there, that is, on the day of my

death.

*

From a conversation in the next room that I overheard, I had learned that Worick and Nicolas ran a business as handymen.

That was one strange conversation, too. I only heard Worick's voice, Nicolas didn't speak. But it wasn't like Worick was simply talking to himself or holding a one-sided conversation either. Rather, it was like listening to someone talking on the phone, where you could only hear one of the participants but knew that a proper conversation was taking place nonetheless.

Anyway, I had learned that they were handymen about a week before my passing away, and since then I had been pondering a certain request.

I was about to die. And die a quiet peaceful death I couldn't have dreamed of before.

I didn't peg myself as greedy enough to wish for anything more than that, but it looked like greed was endless and the appetite really did come with eating. As my heart was calming and finding peace, a single wound appeared from under the filth that had been cleansed away. And I requested to heal that wound.

At the time, Worick sat by my bedside, a plate of thin soup in hand. He held the spoon out to me, saying "Aaam", so I tried to open my mouth but was unable to swallow properly, and the soup dripped down my chin. After one mouthful, I shook my head.

"Listen, Worick," I said. Or tried to, anyway.

He leaned his ear close to my mouth. With difficulty, I continued.

"You're working as a handyman, right?"

"Yeah."

Worick ate a mouthful of the soup himself. "A little too salty," he murmured.

"I want to place a request with you."

"I see."

"Hide me for the next 3 years."

Worick put the plate somewhere next to the pillow. At least that's what I

thought he did. I couldn't really see him do it though.

"3 years," he repeated in a calm voice. Like he was inspecting every little crack in an antique vase or something.

The focusing function of my eyes must have given way then, as my field of vision grew hazy and I couldn't see his face clearly anymore. As far as I could remember, there was a playwright whose last words before death were "Mehr Licht!" [*] I understood the sentiment then.

In any case, I could have sworn that Worick was still smiling with that usual smile of his.

"We don't come cheap though."

"In the inner pocket of my coat..." I had to pause and take a breather there.

"There is a necklace..."

It couldn't have been all that expensive. It wasn't elaborately decorated or anything, I got it as a present so I didn't know the cost, but I guessed that it wasn't too pricey. The coat I mentioned was wrapped around me over the blanket. I asked Worick previously to put it over me like that, and he did.

Now, he fished out that silver necklace shaped like a wing from the coat's pocket. To be exact, I just kind of saw his silhouette move to do that.

He wasn't a man who wouldn't know the value — or lack of thereof — of that necklace, but he still said, "Not bad. Alright, we'll take your request."

Relieved at his reply, I closed my eyes. Knowing full well that I would never open them again.

Something touched my head.

His hand, I guessed, although I couldn't feel its warmth or its smell anymore. The hair he petted must have lost its glossy shine, too, and that weighted on my mind.

Eyes shut, I rambled as if sleep-talking, "When you cremate me, keep my clothes on." I didn't want anyone to see this ugly body of mine.

Worick didn't answer.

Or maybe it was just that I thought I spoke but my voice had already failed

me. But strangely enough, I felt like my words did reach him somehow.

"It is time for you to rest for today, Sophia," Worick whispered as if putting a very young child to sleep.

Yeah.

Good night. And thank you.

This time I knew for sure that the words went unvoiced. I tried to smile but I wasn't sure if I had managed to.

And that was how my 2 weeks and 1 day had come to a close.

T/N:

[*] "More light!" is said to be the dying words of Goethe.

Chapter 1

Fondling the woman's ear tenderly with his left hand, he grabbed her breast roughly with his right. The lump of fat easily altered shape, the expected warmth engulfing his fingers. A nip at the side of the woman's neck made her breathe out a tiny moan. Her skin tasted like sweat a little. And also cosmetics. The former taste he didn't mind, but the latter was terribly unsavory. Despite the fact that an ounce of those beauty products must have cost more than caviar. Humid breathing filled the room, leaving droplets of condensated water to form on the pane of the windows. The pricey bed creaked like it was one of its cheap counterparts. Blocking the woman's field of vision with a kiss, he glanced to check the clock. 15 more minutes of this workout should be adequate enough work for the monetary reward he was getting for this. Worick Arcangelo then decided to buy a bottle of the spiciest wine he could possibly find on his way home.

Precisely 15 minutes later, the woman cried out with an animal-like scream. She just wanted an excuse to scream, he was sure. Everyone wanted to scream. But screaming and shouting alone would make one a freak, and if one still wanted to hide their true colors and masquerade as a good citizen, they had no choice but to buy excuses to scream. When he followed this train of thought, for the first time Worick could think of this woman as sweet.

Until the echo of her scream died out, Worick didn't release his grip on the woman's soft skin.

Then he put on his now wrinkled shirt and tied his long ash blond hair in the back. Except the result turned out messy. All because the index finger of the woman, lying on the bed and giggling, kept playing with his hair. He shook off her white hand somewhat roughly — except there was a trick to how much power you could use in order to create the illusion of affection underlying the action and make your partner buy it.

"Such beautiful hair," the woman commented.
"If you throw in something extra for my services this month, I'll let you touch it some more," Worick replied.

"Unfortunately my husband is coming back today."

"Oh."

On the round table of heavy carved wood found by the bed 4 bills with the portrait of a smart-looking man were left, like a bait. Worick grabbed them and thrust them in his pocket.

"Buy me again any time you want, Madame."

Flashing a smile, calculated to leave the woman not completely satisfied, Worick exited the room.

The conglomeration of lustrous red bricks that was the mansion spat out greasy smoke from its roof. Only when he had passed through the gate, leaving its premises entirely, did Worick finally drop the act.

He considered himself a professional when it came to entertaining ladies. Like a skilled gunsmith knew all about a gun just from touching it, Worick could tell women's inner workings. It was an ability acquired through effort rather than a natural gift, but his easy on eyes features that made him attractive to a certain type of women and fine hair could, perhaps, count as talent. Someone once said that having many talents was more dangerous than having none. But then again, being blessed with a few did not inconvenience Worick for the moment.

While Worick's main job was servicing women part-time, tonight he had another job to attend to, as well.

That other job was that of a Benriya, a handyman.

Suddenly, he wondered just what the difference between a gigolo and a handyman was. Both were about providing a temporary satisfaction of a client's desires, after all. If the client wanted to scream, you made them scream, if they wanted to hear you scream, you screamed for them. Both were splendid occupations you could be proud of and were absolutely indispensable in this city. And precisely because these professions were so indispensable that the labor market was saturated with offers, and if you failed to perform, a replacement was found with ease. Even in that respect, both were identical.

Worick suddenly thought of Sophia. Or rather, not as much of the person herself as of her circumstances and how they were similar to those of another

woman. Sophia's tragedy, too, was but one of many, saturating this city.

A few steps later that Worick advanced while rubbing his neck, he had already forgotten all about Sophia. It wasn't like he had erased her from his memory completely of course, but her image sank into the deep recesses of his mind, beyond the surface of conscious awareness.

He still had work to do, and it had already been a month since she had been cremated.

*

The sun was just beginning to set.

Worick turned a corner, leaving a tidy, if in appearance only, main street behind and entering a narrow back alley. In this city, the narrower an alley was, the heavier the stink it carried got. It was a bad stench produced from vomit, excreta and other substances vaporizing, but Worick had become accustomed to it, for better or for worse.

A little further down, a rather conspicuous human form could be seen. A person stood leaning his back against the surface of a slightly dirty wall with some sort of graffiti painted on it.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Worick called out to that lean and muscular Asian.

Nicolas Brown was a man with short black hair and sharp eyes. He preferred the militaristic style of clothing, typically a black top with three-quarter sleeves and cargo pants. Meaning, he wasn't interested in dressing stylishly.

In this city dominated with black and white, his stature was the same as, or even less than a woman's, and he stood one head shorter than Worick. A long Japanese sword was strapped to his hip, only emphasizing his short height.

'You stink.' He pinched his nose in displeasure, not even trying to mask his discontent.

Nicolas didn't speak. It wasn't like he couldn't at all, he just did his damnest not to, him lacking the working sense of hearing being the reason. That said, since he could read lips and use sign language, there was no inconvenience

between the two.

There was a good reason why the meeting took place in a back alley.

Twilights were the species discriminated against. To a great number of normal humans, they were ‘exceptionally strong livestock’, and even the legal laws obliged them to wear special tags around their necks. That’s why even in everyday life they came to be called ‘Tags’ or ‘Tagged’ more often than not.

Sticking to facts only, Twilights were descendants of humans who were users of a drug designed to augment human physical ability in the war that was fought in the past. Due to the effects of said drug, Twilights possessed physical prowess and the 5 senses far better than normal human ones. Nicolas, for one, was very strong and had extremely good eyesight. On the other hand, he had been robbed of hearing. The phenomenon was called ‘compensation’, a physical anomaly peculiar to their kind and depending on an individual. It was very common for some sort of compensation to be taken in exchange for possessing a particularly superior body.

The reason why their kind, clearly still much stronger than your normal human could ever hope to become, was called something as weak sounding as ‘Twilights’ was because of their very short life spans. The average lifetime was a little over 30, and to live even that long they had to take a drug called Celebrer daily. Be as it may, said Celebrer itself had potent side effects, becoming part of the reason behind Twilights’ short existences. They were creatures born already ill and unable to live without having to ingest poison. Therefore, in contrast to them, typical unaltered humans were called Normals.

Humans had a tendency to hate any living thing that was stronger than them and despise any that was weaker. And Twilights, to them, fell into both those categories. From the start, Twilights were doomed to be thoroughly hated and just as strongly despised.

Which was ridiculously stupid, in Worick’s sincere opinion. Only, among fools, any smart person would be labeled fool. And nothing was more foolish than crying fool at the top of one’s lungs when in the fools’ gathering. That was the take and justification that Worick had long since adopted.

Main streets were for Normals to walk on. It would not do for a Twilight to

stand around in the middle of them. To avoid unnecessary trouble, bearing the stench of the back alleys was the only choice.

"I smell nice though? I had some expensive perfume rubbed onto me, y'know."

Nicolas' right thumb touched his nose in a rubbing motion, then his index finger drew a circle-like shape in the air. Next, it pointed to Worick.

'And I'm saying it stinks.'

"Well, it can't be helped. It's work."

'Wash it out.'

"No. Nothing is more embarrassing than taking a shower in a client's house."

'Want me to fold you in two and stick you into the toilet bowl?'

"Why bother? I'll be smelling like iron soon enough anyway."

The two walked side by side. Handymen would do anything. Well, almost anything. Delivery, paint jobs, taking out garbage... you name it. They would be the champions of justice if you wanted them to or siding with bad guys if the client so desired. The two last ones listed were practically the same thing, and the one in the middle sometimes paid quite handsomely. In any case, their shirts would often get dirty.

Today's job was on the cheap side.

"Granny Joel sure has it tough though, running a shop in a place like that."

The request the two had undertaken was to get rid of a nuisance. A simple job of packing a lively and uselessly conceited lot into a cask or a wooden box so that they stopped being a bother. The champions of justice did garbage disposal, too. The size of the aforementioned lively bunch's vocabulary was like 3 words anyway, and all 3 had more or less the same meaning, so trying to establish communication was futile from the get-go. Then again, one couldn't exactly start merrily open up brand new holes in bodies with bullets before figuring out the bunch's connections and backers. After all, some people would fly into mad rage if something of their own, no matter how trashy that possession happened to be, was broken.

'There's no end to 'em. If I loop off their legs, maybe that'll finally teach 'em to keep their distance.'

"You'll get the shop's wall all dirty if you do that. And I wanna try and be nice to the only smokes shop in town. Besides, ending up on Granny's bad side is a horror in and of itself, you realize."

Worick's mind suddenly brought its growing nicotine urge to his attention, probably because he went and uttered the words 'smokes shop'. He flicked the silicon stone of his Zippo lighter, and on the second try a Pall Mall stick lit up.

He had first met Nicolas quite a long time ago. He was 12 at the time, so it was more than 20 years ago already. Worick knew he had changed over time, but he didn't think Nicolas had, not really. He got somewhat taller but still was a shortie, neither his hair style nor the look in his eyes underwent much of a change. The fact that he didn't smoke was also the same as ever. The way he treated Worick became more familiar and informal. In essence, however, he consistently remained an employee.

Worick let the sole of his leather shoe step on the fallen cigarette butt and crush it.

It would be faster if they used a desolate shortcut to the smokes shop. Going straight ahead on the junction of three roads, they reached a landfill with small clearings. The vacant lot of about 10 yards in each of the 4 directions was surrounded by blocks of concrete reaching to an adult's waist. It was the site of some demolished facility, but with no construction plans for the land, it had become a hotbed for illegal garbage dumping, lamps and lighting fixtures with cracked bulbs, moisture absorbing furniture and empty wine casks and barrels now littering the place.

At the entrance to it, Nicolas, who walked first, suddenly stopped in his tracks. Worick stopped as well and mentally checked the holster on his left side.

From around the turn of the path, weaving its way through the dumping ground, a man appeared, walking unsteadily. His quilted down coat showed tears in a few places, with its fluffy filling spilling out. Blood was oozing from his side. His steps were unsure as he collapsed onto a couch found a little ahead of the two's position, listlessly sinking into the cushions.

Worick smiled lopsidedly.

"A drunkard, maybe?"

'If not, then a junkie.'

Of course, it was not quite it. That wound was obviously inflicted as a result of some sort of an assault. The man took quite a hideous beating. Which was nothing unusual. In this city, there was a lot of remains far larger than a cat's for crows to feed on. If you started fussing over them, you'd never see the end of it.

As the Benriya were about to move past and forward, three more young men appeared from beyond the curve of the road. They all wore, and seemingly almost against their will, uniformed black suits. The newest addition to some Family, picked up a very short while ago, perhaps? That's how they looked at least, based on that fashion style.

The one in the center pointed with his eyes to the man in the quilted down coat, lying on the couch.

"Hey old boys. You this guy's pals?" The youngster asked in a low voice, intentionally throwing his head to the side to show off the tribal tattoo on the side of his neck. To him, that probably passed for intimidation, although in all honesty a stray dog's growl was more intimidating.

"Nope," Worick shook his head. Desperately trying to keep the corners of his mouth from lifting up in a smirk all the while.

"Then get lost already." The thug took his eyes off and away from Worick, apparently forgetting all about him, and started on his approach to the couch.

Fighting the smile threatening to stretch his mouth, Worick whispered to Nicolas next to him, "Nic-chan, have you noticed?"

Nicolas, having read his lips from the side, gave a chuckle, unable to keep a straight face.

'Good thing we haven't missed each other.'

"Lucky us, you reap what you sow and maybe this is our reward?"

'It's a small city, is all.'

Worick shrugged. And took half a step forward.

The young thugs turned their heads to him.

He smiled, amiably and disarmingly.

"We're not that guy's pals, but we're sincerely happy to have run into you. We're your big fans, you see, so how about a handshake?"

A guy with a tribal tattoo on his neck, a guy with cornrows and a Hispanic skinhead with a scar above his left eye. The three's peculiar traits matched the description of the 'damn brats' that Granny Joel had provided to a tee.

"Huh?" Just as the tattooed guy opened his mouth, a thick shoe sole forcibly closed it.

Nicolas didn't feel like waiting anymore.

The youngster's chin was now pointing towards the dark night sky. Falling down backwards, his head landed into a discolored garbage bag with precision. Empty cans tackily clattered, scattering about. Dry sand billowed, dancing in the air and darkening the already dark night sky a shade more.

Worick covered his mouth with a hand and coughed a couple of times.

"Partner. Getting a jump is not fair, y'know? This is where you're supposed to share."

'There's 3 of 'em. If it ain't divisible by 2, then they're all mine. And you go there, partner.' Smirking, Nicolas pointed to the couch where the man in the down jacket lay collapsed. The look on his face was like a dog's that was given a ball to play.

Well, there was no denying that the dude had a trigger-happy battle-crazy streak. He probably felt in his element the most precisely when he fought.

Quickly dropping his center of gravity, Nicolas kicked the ground. By the time you became aware he had vanished, he was already airborne. Skinhead and Cornrows had yet to realize what was happening. Nicolas landed behind them. Twisting around, Skinhead belatedly noticed the pendants swishing across Nicolas' chest, and his breath caught pathetically.

"A Tag?! You gotta be shitting me! Why are we—"

Nicolas didn't bother to read his lips for the continuation. Violently grabbing the man by the neck — thin compared to his arm — he smashed him face first

into the ground. The guy's nose broke with a squishy crack. Nicolas' body, riding the momentum, whirled by half a turn, brute force pulling Cornrows by the hair into the motion. The bones in the guy's neck groaned audibly. The force of a throw added to the centrifugal force had him crash into a bookshelf 3 yards away.

"Be careful not to break them beyond fixing though? It'd be a problem if we were demanded to pay off damages."

Worick didn't think Nicolas was looking but said it anyway, if merely going through the motions. Then, at last, he shifted his attention to the man on the couch.

It was a gentle-looking young man not suited to violence. His sweet delicate features would attract many potential buyers, no doubt, and his age looked to be around 20. As to his physique, although it was hard to say for sure due to the oversized quilted down coat he had on, it didn't look like he was built strongly. There was a straight white streak in his bangs on the side, making Worick want to laugh because the guy looked like a kid desperately trying to stretch himself to appear taller.

"Got dragged into something nasty, eh, pampered boy? Lucid enough to tell us your mommy's phone number?"

When Worick called out to him, the young man shielded his body with both arms. Staying buried in the couch as deep as he could, he looked up at Worick with terrified eyes.

"...Who are you?"

"One sca~ry fella," Worick smiled. "You sure been through the wringer. Does it hurt?"

"I'm...OK."

The youth shifted, sitting down deeper. But even that simple movement looked stiff. Like he sat down into an easy chair with bent legs. Still, surprisingly, the young man's breathing wasn't disarrayed. It seemed like the pause in his earlier utterance only occurred due to him being frightened. His wound probably wasn't as bad as it looked at a glance.

"Mn, attaboy. Now try to stand up, c'mon."

Worrick took him by the lapels and pulled. The youth grimaced slightly.

"Oh? So it does hurt?"

"No, it's..."

He lowered his head and covered his face with his right hand. Probably crying. Over a trifle thing like that.

Worick flashed a malicious smile.

"Don't feel down, pampered boy. Oh right, I'll take you to a good place. The place where a cute girl will comfort you tenderly."

Theo's clinic had a great nurse, after all. Looking at it objectively, her being there was a waste of her talents, but the Benriya appreciated the fact since they frequented the place themselves.

Worick purposefully let go of the young man's lapels. The youth fell backwards, the back of his head sinking into the couch.

'Wah!' he groaned lamely, and Worick cackled with laughter.

The guy appeared to be too feeble to make it in this city, but his lack of malice towards strangers earned him some points.

When Worick glanced to check what Nicolas was doing, he found him crouching on the ground with his hand in the unconscious thugs' pockets. Worick personally doubted their wallets would be particularly thick, but the thugs should have had enough to provide the Benriya with some pocket money.

"Hey, Nic. I'll leave the mission of saying hello to Granny to you."

Nicolas didn't seem to pay close attention, but it turned out he was able to see what Worick said just fine anyway.

'That's your responsibility.' Nicolas' face spoke volumes of how bothersome he found the task to be, and Worick smiled a nasty little smile.

"That's your punishment for hogging all the fun. And you know, it has to be very boring for Granny to always have to look at the same mug when she needs to air her frustrations to someone."

'What're you gonna do?'

"Escort this pampered kid."

Nicolas' eyes narrowed as he took in the youth's appearance. The scowl on his face then deepened.

'So you finally stooped to playing that side of the f—'

"No friggin way. Besides, I'm cuter than him."

Worick shrugged his shoulders. Then he mouthed voicelessly, with his lips only, informing Nicolas, '*Just to be on the safe side. Since I've never seen him here before.*'

Worick had good memory. So good, in fact, that it was abnormal and had a special name attached as a medical disorder. Be it a customer he passed by in a dark bar or a bystander from the news coverage, everything got saved indiscriminately into the memory cells, kept there neatly and orderly.

And Worick didn't remember ever seeing this particular young man anywhere before.

Generally, there were always good reasons for any and all exceptions like that, and in this city such reasons were always of the annoying kind. If this kid was just an unlucky schmuck randomly picked on by 3 thugs, then it was one thing, but if they hunted him down for a more specific reason, it would be an entirely different story. From where Worick stood, all the Benriya tried to achieve here was doing a favor to the smokes shop's Granny, but from an outsider's perspective, it could very well look like they had acted to specifically help this particular youngster.

Nicolas flashed a ferocious grin.

'You know, I've been feeling that I didn't have enough workout lately.'
"Provided it's the kind of workout that will bring us money. Since we're pros, yeah?"

'Any chance to let loose?'

"Dunno. Depends on luck, I guess."

'You reap what you sow, eh.'

"Just a small city, is all."

In the small city of Ergastulum, surrounded with walls on all sides, all you needed to do to run into trouble was take a few steps. Whether the fact was fortunate or unfortunate, no one cared.

Why hospitals insisted on using the cross symbol as their emblem was something that Worick often wondered about.

Its shape evoked associations with death. Was it because hospitals were places where people died? If so, then maybe it made some sense.

Whatever the case, Theo's clinic, too, had a cross inscribed into a down-facing pentagon on its signboard. It was a two-storied building snuggled between 2 others and located in District 7, a little north of Granny Joel's smokes shop.

When the door opened, Nina, who was organizing clinical records or something of the sort, lifted her head to look at the callers.

"Worick-san!"

Although being only a 11 year old girl, Nina was already a registered nurse. In contrast to her age, she was a hardworker and also quite skilled. Worick heard she had even had some experience in performing surgeries. What's more, she always approached both her patients and their injuries or diseases with unyielding honesty and integrity, and that side of her Worick had solid trust in.

"Hello, Nina-chan. You're cute as always."

Blush spread across the girl's cheeks from an offhand cheesy compliment like that. Well, Nina really was a cute girl, and Worick honestly did find her adorable. Only, she had yet to learn how to use her own charms. She may have acquired the skills of a real hospital nurse but that didn't mean she had become a grownup.

Nina shifted her gaze to the young man covered with wounds standing behind Worick.

"Um, who would that person be?"

"Someone I picked up at the garbage dump. I have yet to hear his name myself."

"Johann," the youth replied in a voice barely above whisper.

What, was he nervous even around an 11 year old girl?

"I see. Well, nice to meet ya."

"...Yes, nice to meet you, too."

Johann's frightened eyes peeked through the gaps of his streaked hair. Didn't look like he had a very happy childhood. Though it begged a more profound question of whether something like a happy childhood was even possible in Ergastulum.

Seeing those eyes of his made Worick feel a bang of pity, so he instead turned to Nina, asking, "Is the doc in?"
"Yes, he is. I will go call him."

Nina rushed into the back rooms with small quick steps of a squirrel or other similar small animal. Just as she put her hand on the doorknob intending to turn it, the door opened.

"Woah!" With a short yelp she planted face first into the white robe on the other side of the door.

Theo.

He was a bespectacled man in his thirties, his hair kept short, and no matter how many times Worick saw him, he always found him to be sickly pale. It unfailingly made Worick itch to tell him to run a thorough medical check on himself first, but if it turned out that a prolonged hospital stay was required, it'd be a problem for Worick. Or rather, what mattered was that Theo was Nicolas' physician.

Theo gave Nina, who lost her balance, what looked to be a stern glance but gently steadied her with his hands on her shoulders. By the time Nina's both feet were planted firmly on the dreary floor again, he was already looking at the visitors.

"You just keep bringing them one after another, huh. I'm amazed how you never get bored of it."

"Well, sorry about that. I'm just a man with a lot of friends, you see."
"I won't tell you to not bring me more work, but I am getting a little tired of that, I'll have you know."

Thrusting his hands into the pockets of his white gown, Theo approached Johann with clattering footsteps.

"Not a face I've seen."

"I know right? I thought he might be right up your alley, doc."

"Well..." Theo's answer was non-committal.

It probably wasn't that Worick's offhand comment actually hit the bull's eye accidentally but Theo's reaction did stir an uncomfortable feeling. The doctor examined Johann's face with the intense look of someone appraising the authenticity of a painting, touched his neck and checked the youth's both palms.

"His wound can't be that big of a deal," Worick butted in.

"That's for me to decide. You, to the bed."

Theo led the youth to the farther one of the two beds lined up at the center of the room, Johann following him with scared steps. Nina stole a glance at the clinic's entranceway — probably checking if Nicolas was with them — before chasing after the doctor and the youth.

For a while, Worick had nothing better to do than stare at the curtains that were slid shut with characteristic rustling. He didn't take a good look at how serious the wound underneath the quilted down coat was.

Worick wanted to light up one of his Pall Malls, but thought better of it. If anything, borrowing the washstand found deeper to the right seemed like a better idea of killing time. Having washed his hands, he moved onto his face. He let Nicolas handle all the fighting this time, yet he still got dirty — with the dust and sand fluttering in the back alleys and the oily stench that always clung to this city no matter where you went.

Next to the washstand, there could be found the stairway leading to the second floor. A look at it made him remember how uncomfortably light Sophia's body felt when he carried her in his arms. Surprisingly, it appeared she had made a deeper impression on him than he had expected.

Worick wiped his face dry with a clean towel.

'It's because of this wound,' he thought as he looked in the mirror. The faint traces of the two wounds her fingers left on his neck still remained. They would disappear very soon, but until they did, he would probably keep recalling the too light weight of her body he had felt then.

Bringing both his hands near his nose, he was about to check if they still stunk, but was interrupted with the roaring of an engine coming to a standstill in front of the clinic. That engine sounded unfamiliar, Worick thought, focusing his gaze on the clinic's door.

Suspecting every single caller might have been stupid, but this clinic treated Twilights a little too nicely, and the fact could very well earn it malice and hatred.

"Worick." Theo's voice that came from the other side of the curtain was pushy.

"C'mon, it's not a rough customer. Probably."

The sound of a car's door opening then closing could be heard. Only one then.

Some people from the mafia had an eye on Theo's clinic, but their grudge wasn't of the personal sort. It was mainly because of Celebrer — which, to the mafia, was the magic drug for taming Twilights — and Theo sold it too much and too cheap, which made him a nuisance. And if he was an eyesore for an organization, they would come to crush him as an organization. Certainly not send just one person to do it.

"In any case, I can't drop what I'm doing at the moment. You go deal with them."

"Aye-aye. Coming."

A handyman would do almost anything. Including being a doctor's reception desk when requested.

Coming closer to the front door, Worick tacked a damp lock clinging to his cheek behind his ear.

He was about 2 yards away from the door when it opened. Standing on the doorstep was a man of petite build.

"Hello, the shitty clinic welcomes you—" Showing the man a smile, Worick carefully surveyed him.

The man seemed a little younger than the Benriya, probably had only just hit his thirties. His gaudy striped suit was paired with camel-colored leather shoes. His taste obviously sucked no matter how you looked at it. The articles

themselves though were not cheap.

"Is yours emergency? Sorry, but you'll have to wait until the doc's finished with the guy that came in before you. Also, if you want a medicine to fix up your taste, you should go to a place with more girls."

The man wasn't fazed in the slightest. Right hand behind his ass and a disinterested expression on his face, he walked up to Worick, his leather shoes making unnecessary loud tapping sounds against the floor with each step. Behind him, the door closed with a soft click.

Worick stared at the man's forehead, only mere 10 inches away now. With a mundane motion, the man presented his right hand, as if for a handshake, except what was grasped in it was a Colt Woodsman the muzzle of which got pressed right to Worick's chin from beneath. At the same time, Worick drew a Colt Government M1911 from the holster on his left side and pushed it against the left side of the man's chest.

"What do you know, you are in hot haste after all, ain't ya. We're not demons, if your upset belly aches so much, we'll let use our toilet."
"Yeah, you're a lifesaver. I might need to use it to flush a certain shithead."
"Now I got a question. The shithead you mentioned, who might it be?"
"The wiseass grinning like an idiot even with my gun to his head. What did you do to my kid brother?"

Worick took another long hard look at the man, then let out a small sigh.

Shoulder length wavy hair. Thin brows above light gray eyes. A peculiar manner of speaking that lifted his upper lip baring his protruding canines.

Another unfamiliar face. Just great.

*

The thing Worick had figured out for the time being was that no matter which side it hit from, trouble remained troublesome. Also, that men that chose gaudy stripes for their suits lacked taste in more than one sense. And that the tasteless man named Dario was the self-proclaimed big brother of Johann.

"Haha! I'm really sorry, man. I just heard that you took the beat up Johann somewhere, and I thought you must've kidnapped him."

The small man's voice was strangely grating on Worick's ears, the fact being added to the growing list of Worick's discoveries that today brought.

Currently, Worick was being subjected to an inhumane torture.

The torture was in the form of having been thrust into the passenger seat of the man's car and forced to listen to the man's cheerful rambling while being taken for a drive around Ergastulum where it was impossible to reach any decent speed by definition. As far as tortures went, this one was quite thorough.

Dario's beloved car was such that it made one believe that it was a clever invention the sole purpose of which was to deepen the scowl on those who saw it as much as possible. It was probably a Fiat, except it had been stripped of the original model's charm resolutely and completely. All because the area immediately below the windshield sported an eccentric design with a substantial horizontal dent. To Worick, that form brought to mind deep-sea fish locked in the dark of the ocean depths and dying without ever learning what shape meant. The car's paintjob was vivid violet, and on its hood there was drawn maybe a dog, maybe a wolf — in short, some brown animal, and it was sneering.

Left hand on the steering wheel, Dario fumbled with his right to fish out one cigarette from the Garam pack lying on the dashboard and put it into his mouth. He held out the pack to Worick, but Worick gestured to decline the offer and took out one of his Pall Malls instead. Dario nimbly stroke a match with one hand and lit up both cigarettes.

"I'm really sorry about my rudeness earlier, Eric-san."

"Let's drop the formalities, we're not that far apart in age anyway. Oh, and it's Worick."

"Okay, Worick. My apologies, I'm just really no good with names. I always leave all those troublesome details to Johann to handle."

Dario didn't really look embarrassed in the least as he blew out a puff of smoke. Worick did the same, forcing Dario's sweet smelling smoke back with a puff of his Pall Mall. Two kinds of smoke intermingled in the cramped space of the car's interior and leaked out of the windows.

Pointing with the end of his cigarette that smouldered slowly, Dario said, "Well, I did think it was odd. Like, why would a nice guy who could coolly smile even at gunpoint do anything bad to a kind soul like Johann."

"Right back at you. Acting all cool like you didn't even know what a gun was."

And this was the real reason why Worick got into the car of this strange man — one at that whose tastes were hopelessly far from Worick's own with probably no chance to ever align. Worick had seen men who pretended to be calm at gunpoint. Men who had resigned themselves, who flew into a fit of mad rage, and even those who, depending on the circumstances, were positively delighted. He'd seen them all. But Dario was none of those types. He simply didn't care about the deep opening of the gun's barrel pushed against his chest just an inch away from his heart. It looked like he ignored the gun's existence altogether with the whole of his body starting with his head.

That brand of crazy was not common. It reminded Worick of his partner's, if only the tiniest bit.

"Heh," Dario smirked intrepidly. "In such a shootout, even if the lead did go flying, the odds of dying were 50/50, right? And when gambling, I've never once lost when I had a 50% chance."

"They weren't 50/50 though. We could easily shoot each other dead simultaneously."

"Oh, I see. I didn't think of it." The man nodded, as if in admiration.

Worick let out a genuine sigh along with a puff of smoke.

"You love gambling, right? Remember the zero in roulette?"

"Wait, roulette has a zero?"

"Yeah, the house takes it all. Aka the hellhole."

"Oh well, let's not sweat the small stuff. We got to know each other thanks to that. And that means you're in luck."

"In luck? How so?"

"You helped Johann. Next, I'll help you. And I'll give so much alcohol to drink that you'll drown in it."

"Despite being broke with no money?"

"I'll make some soon enough."

Back in Theo's clinic, Dario insisted on thanking those involved in saving Johann. His next words, though, were, "Where's the nearest casino?" Having no money to do the proper thanking, he apparently planned to make enough through gambling.

The idea was foolish, to say the least, but then it occurred to Worick that he was the bigger fool of the two precisely because he was sitting next to such a man, and that made him smile to himself lopsidedly. Oh well, going along with this man was a better call than letting him stay in the clinic, in any case.

"Turn right at the next corner."

"OK."

Dario turned the steering wheel in accordance with Worick's directions. In a marked contrast to his boisterous way of conducting himself, his driving style was surprisingly careful.

"Stop the car in front of the smokes shop over there."

"You run out? Smoke mine as much as you like."

"Yours are too sweet for my tastes. Besides, I may not look it, but I'm a pretty careful man. Usually I don't wait until I run out."

"Then why are we here? You don't wanna say that small shop is a casino?"

"Nope. But you said you wanna treat Johann's savior to something, right?"

"Yeah. And I never lie."

The car that must have been history's ugliest Fiat came to a halt in front of the smokes shop.

Worick's thumb pointed outside the car's window.

"Then the person you wanna treat is over there."

At the end of where the thumb was pointing was an extremely sour looking mug of the man who tried his damnest to ignore the ceaseless flood of grumbling and complaints Granny Joel unleashed on him.

*

Dario really didn't lie.

He had no money. Actually, forget money, he didn't even have a wallet.

Worick loaned him the money he got paid earlier for listening to the woman scream, and Dario quadrupled the amount in the blink of an eye.

When Dario set foot in the casino, the first thing he did was watch intently the baccarat table for about 10 minutes. It didn't really look like he was analyzing anything, just chatting with Worick on easy and foolish topics. Then, however, he sat down to play for just 2 games. Out of the blue, he bet the entire sum on the player and doubled it, and in the next game doubled the amount again. With that, he was done.

Having entered a tiny bar in a back alley with only a counter and 2 tables, Worick was given back the 4 bills he had loaned to Dario. He felt like he had been swindled somehow, and that mood floated in the air.

"You really are good at gambling."
"Yeah, I've never lost. And I obtained all the valuables through gambling."
"Impressive. You should've earned more then."
"I hate having to tote anything around. Smokes and a gun is all I need."
"What a shame. With enough money, you could've bought a car with the prettiest hood ever, y'know?"
"Why would I want to buy my own car twice?"

It looked like Dario actually considered that violet monster of his the best car ever made. Tastes and preferences sure differed. Complaining over someone's bad taste in cars wasn't really worth it. All it would earn Worick was exile from the passenger seat of that car forever.

Worick and Dario toasted with their drinks of choice — two different brands of whiskey. Next to them, Nicolas drank his Perrier in a way that looked like he was lapping on it. He boasted such high susceptibility to alcohol that he could even get intoxicated on whiskey bonbons.

Taking a sip of Old Parr on the rocks Worick remembered that he had decided to content himself with only wine tonight. But now that he had started drinking, it couldn't be helped. In the generously illuminated bar, a wine glass would look out of place, anyway.

Dario, who chose something as unbelievable as Bowmore, grimaced after the first mouthful and complained, "Geez, this tastes lousy."

For the first time, his and Worick's tastes coincided, although at the same time Worick was tempted to point out that Dario shouldn't've ordered it to begin with then.

Their table was loaded with pizza Margherita, mimosa salad, escargots al ajillo, churros for soaking in olive oil and whatnot. Worick wasn't especially hungry, but since he made Nicolas who couldn't drink come along practically against his will, he ordered all of that out of consideration for him. And like the unstoppable march of an elephant, Nicolas was making his way through those plates, slowly but surely.

Dario, meanwhile, pushed the glass with Bowmore aside and ordered a new drink, no less shocking than the previous one — Venizia Mojito. Except he didn't really bother to get a good taste of it either as his fancy got strongly caught with the Japanese sword strapped to Nicolas' hip.

"Hey, hey, it's what's called a samurai sword, right? Hey man, lemme pull it out!"

Between wolfing down pieces of Margherita, Nicolas signed to Worick, 'He's a pain. Get him off me.'

"You don't need my help with that, do it yourself."

'I've already worked plenty today.'

"What, they were just 3 Normals though?"

'No. The real request was to listen to Granny complain.'

"Good job handling it. I feel for ya."

Dario, who was watching the two's exchange, seemed to have shifted the focus of his curiosity from Nicolas' sword to Nicolas himself. His hands moved in brisk chops, copying Nicolas.

"Ain't it inconvenient though?"

If anything, the utter lack of consideration behind the question left Worick awed. Being bluntly asked to his face if he felt the inconvenience of it had to be a rare experience for Nicolas as well.

'Routine.'

"Born that way?"

'Yeah.'

"Ohh. In that case, it really must feel just natural, I guess."

Nicolas' answers were mechanical and monosyllabic. That aside, the very fact of Dario successfully holding a conversation with Nicolas like it was nothing made Worick purse his lips.

"Hey, you got what he meant just now?"

"Of course I got it. Body language is universal, after all. Like any baby would laugh playing peekaboo, right?"

"Is that really body language though? Besides, what we use is sign language."

"Oh, sign language, huh? Then I don't know it."

Ridiculous as it was, after that Dario really stopped getting what Nicolas tried to convey. Despite that, he kept coming on strong, and Nicolas, frowning in displeasure at the buddy-buddy attitude the man took with him, gave him a cold shoulder, but the man just refused to take the hint.

When both he and the blond Benriya had finished their second glass and Dario's cheeks got dusted faint pink, Worick finally deemed it time to breach the real issue at hand.

"You and that kid, Johann, you're not this city born, right?"

"No, not quite from here, no. How did you know?"

"Your accent. You can tell an insider from an outsider right away based on that."

Johann barely spoke and even when he did, it was in quiet murmurs, but Dario talked a lot, so much that he was actually hard on the ears.

"Is it OK to ask where you're from then?"

"North Gate."

There were 4 adjacent cities bordering Ergastulum on all the 4 cardinal directions, as if surrounding it. Each of them was called a gate city and housed government troops. In order to keep close tabs on Twilights, of course.

As a general rule, Twilights could only live in Ergastulum. Even if they could survive elsewhere for some time, they would still come back to Ergastulum. All because Celebrer, the controversial drug that preserved their very lives, could only be reliably obtained in Ergastulum. Nevertheless, in order to ensure that

Twilights wouldn't inadvertently spill out into the outside world, this city was barricaded with the 4 gate cities, one on each side.

In case of emergency, mercenary troops representing each city as well as armed groups corresponding to them were to be assembled, joining forces with the government troops in order to contain the situation. Among said troops there were specialized expert combatants capable of challenging Twilights.

To stop Twilights, you needed to either muster military might of that magnitude or have other Twilights fighting on your side. That's how overwhelming Twilights' power was.

Worick cast a glance at the plain unattractive tags hanging around Nicolas' neck.

—In other words, Dario, too, was fully aware of the danger those tags signified. His correctly assuming that Nicolas' hearing defect was congenital was because he knew enough about Twilights to be aware of the compensation. And yet, he didn't put up a wall between himself and Nicolas.

The fact made Worick's alcohol taste a little yummier as he smiled a wry smile.

—Hey, hey, wait, can't be getting sidetracked here.

Nicolas' job was slaying bad guys, so it was up to Worick to determine whether suspicious people they came across were good guys or bad guys.

"So, in the end, why did you two come to Ergastulum? For sightseeing? Guest-working? Or maybe fighting a war?"

"Mine and Johann's goals ain't the same. I came to keep a promise."

"Oh. What promise, pray tell?"

"It ain't anything grand. Actually, I don't even remember it all that well myself."

What the hell. Was he trying to dodge the question?

"Then what about Johann?"

"He came because he's free."

"Free?"

"We're stray dogs, you see. We're the ones who decide where our chain ends." Lifting his lip, Dario beamed at the Benriya happily. "We wanted to come, so we

came. We don't need any other reason."

It wasn't like Worick trusted this flippant ridiculous man. And yet, he didn't feel inclined to look down on the guy either, the fact being a mystery even to Worick himself. Keeping his guard up, he decided to venture one more question that took him another step away from the safe zone.

"Johann was attacked. Have any idea why?"

He didn't get his hopes up, which was right because Dario looked blank when asked that.

"Oh. That's a mystery to me. Just who and why attacked him?"

Worick studied the man's eyes very carefully but didn't find any signs of him hiding something.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I guess in this city it's weirder to not get attacked when walking the back alleys."

So the question was, why Johann was walking the back alleys in the first place. It was one thing if it was a man like Dario. It was still within reason to assume that he just didn't bother to think before acting. But Johann didn't strike Worick as someone that rash and reckless, at all. For a timid young man like him to set foot into the maze of the city's back streets a damn good reason was needed.

In any case, Worick decided against digging any deeper into it. Taking a sip out of his third glass of Old Parr, he smiled broadly.

"Well, be more careful from now on. If he wants to go somewhere, better just give him a lift in that conspicuous super violet beauty of yours."

"Right you are. I'll try to stick by his side as much as possible. Thanks, man," Dario grinned toothily.

Grabbing the glass with Bowmore he set aside earlier, he took a gulp from it, "Argh, tastes like shit," he grimaced again.

After that, for a while the two engaged in a chat about his Fiat.

*

That was how the two 2-man teams met.

One could suspect fate at work, but in reality it was merely by chance.

If one was to put it in a nutshell, Ergastulum was a small city, was all.

If it was a little bigger, the story would probably be different. Or maybe nothing worthy of being called a story would take place at all.

Anyway, three days after the outing where the more communicative halves of the 2-man teams drank the night away, a certain piece of news started traveling around Ergastulum, told in a breaking voice intermittent with noise over a blurry distorted video footage.

To this city, it was the mundane and worthless kind of news, but to Worick and Nicolas it wasn't as meaningless.

At the time, the two happened to have a meeting with the boss of a certain huge mafia organization.

Chapter 2

For the story to make sense, first the events that took place 2 days after the aforementioned night out need to be retold.

At dusk, Worick and Nicolas were attacked by a group in black suits. Although the Benriya had already had a similar experience just the other day, it had to be said that in this city, the specialization of men in black wasn't business but violence. Which certainly was not something to be surprised about. The two beat their attackers at their own game. Even if the Benriya didn't wear ties, their forte, too, was violence nonetheless. And if anything, Worick liked to think of it as them being cooler because they went about said violence smarter.

The men were armed with guns. They knew full well what it meant to brandish a gun, and there were no doubts or hesitation when they pulled the trigger. That's why the Handymen had no choice but to kill them. Nothing to it. Except it did raise a problem. Leaving several bodies lying around, even in a place as crappy as an ever stinking back alley, was not an option. He may have not looked it, but Worick considered himself a sympathizer of those fighting for beautification of the city, and what's more, in this city there lived an old dog with a nose highly sensitive to the smell of gunpowder and blood.

About 5 minutes after the Benriya came under attack and a little over 2 minutes after they were finished killing their attackers, an old police officer with graying hair popped up at the scene in an old-fashioned sedan. Half-hanging out his car's window, he went into a shouting fit, "You again, goddamn Benriya brats! I've told you countless times to not make messes without permission! How many more time do I have to be a goddamn broken record for you to get it through your thick skulls at last?!"

Worick and Nicolas knew Chad Atkins, an inspector with the First Division of the Central Police HQ's Criminal Investigations Department, since back when they had first come to Ergastulum. He was over 50 by now and had been in active service for at least 20 years that they could vouch for, likely more. An exemplary dirty cop who knew all the ways to survive in this city, and who, to the two, also was their senior in life, unchangingly nagging and meddlesome

ever since they were kids.

Chad stopped the car in front of Worick and Nicolas and spared a glance to the blood-stained suits and the bodies wrapped in them.

"And you just had to kill some really troublesome schmucks, huh. The police ain't the city's garbage cleaning crew, you know!"

Nicolas twisted his features into a fed up grimace where Chad couldn't see it and complained in sign language with listless motions of his hands.

'The garbage cleaning crew actually does a better job than him.'

Chad spun around to him and applied an unforgiving fist.

"Shuddup, damn brat!"

'How did you see what I said from that angle?!"

"I don't need to see it to know what a shitty brat is thinking! Dammit, if you tangle up with the mafia, contact me before you take them out at least!"

Chad stuck a Hope cigarette between his teeth. Worick struck his Zippo lighter, thrusting both hands through the window and lighting the cigarette's tip.

"We were sure these guys were just high-pressure bullet salesmen, you see. Killing them was a bad call, you say?"

"Yeah. And worse than you two think."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"They're the remnants of the Lombardi Family."

Worick searched his memory.

—The Lombardi Family.

"They're more like a street gang of young hoodlums looked up to on the streets than a mafia though? They don't look like an especially troublesome enemy."

"Except I don't recommend lumping them together with other weaklings. The fuckers pushed wholesale merch as sickening as 'dynamite' even to big mafia Families."

"Oh, so they're arms dealers."

Chad bit the filter of his cigarette with his front teeth.

"They sold dying Tags with particularly hideous cases of poisoning in a set with Celebrer of abnormal concentration — only uppers, at that. The way to use that package is simple: you overdose a Tag on the drug and send that suicide present to the enemy. That's the 'dynamite'."

"Oh. That's nasty alright, I'm feeling sick to my stomach."

There were 2 types of Celebrer, intended for use as a set. One was a stimulant called upper, and the other a depressant, called downer. The upper temporary enhanced Twilights' physical ability and charged them with power and vitality, but on the other hand, it produced a lot of side effects. To reduce those side effects and prolong the duration of the effects the downer was needed. So with Twilights' life sustenance in mind, it was advisable to take both those kinds of Celebrer together simultaneously.

What would happen to a Twilight who already had one foot in the grave if they were forced to overdose on the upper?

It wasn't hard to guess. Their physical ability would temporary skyrocket and in the extreme frenzy of it, they would go psycho, rampaging uncontrollably, but when the drug wore off, they would pretty much drop dead. A one-shot weapon of mass destruction... indeed, the aftermath of using it would certainly resemble that of explosives.

"They weren't a union like the Paulklee Guild that employs Tags. They only carried disposable goods, so no management and administration costs to speak of, making that business profitable. And there's no small number of people out there who'd sell their Tags that became useless for a bargain price."

Worick put a hand to his chin. Gaze steady, "Oh," he repeated in a murmur again. "And what did you mean by 'remnants'?"

"Just what I said. Just recently, the Lombardi family got pretty much destroyed."

"A management fuckup with one of their goods leading to self-destruction? They sound like such smart guys, eh."

"No, that's outta question. From what the crime scene looked like, it's obvious that they got raided by some invaders. Besides, for a 'dynamite explosion' the

bodies were much too clean.”

“So to sum it up, those guys were just way too good at making people hate them, right?”

“The question is, who exactly hated them so much.”

“Any suspects?”

“Yeah, a couple. You two.”

Chad reached his hand out the car’s window and pointed with the end of his cigarette to Worick. The long part of the stick that had already turned to ash fell off, landing on the tip of Worick’s shoe and getting it dirty.

“Wow. How come?”

Worick leaned on the sedan’s roof and, balancing on one leg, shook off the ash from the shoe on the other. Chad swept off the hand above that was leaning on the roof of his car.

“The raid was done by a small group. Of only one or two people, most likely. The Lombardi guys, in contrast, had 15 or 16 on their side...”

“Oh yeah, youngsters just love to flock together, eh.”

“Except that flock was wholesale slaughtered. It wasn’t like the bodies were ridden with bullets from a small arms either. A feat like that is only possible to a Tag. And based on that, we can narrow down the list of suspects greatly.”

“Hey, hey, by that logic, every damn incident involving a Tag would be on us, you realize?”

“I’m not finished yet. The Lombardi Family crossed someone with no prejudice against Tags — that is, someone like you. And the clincher here is the wounds from a bladed weapon left on the bodies. With all that evidence, it’s a simple association game even our greenass rookies can win with no problem.”

“We’re really outta luck here, huh.”

Worick chewed on his Pall Mall, fisting a hand in his own hair. Chad took another glance at the dead bodies in the alley.

“Suppose I buy that those survivors simply believed the rumors and came to get revenge on you. That said, the fact that you’ve just turned the members of the Lombardi family into bad-smelling corpses still stands.”

“They’re not members though. You forgot the ex- prefix.”

"Yeah. And I can only hope that the gossip mill won't forget it."

It wasn't like Chad seriously suspected them — at least Worick didn't think so. That said, this incident provided enough material for the gossip mill to start turning.

Worick lit up the Pall Mall stuck between his lips, took a drag, breathing in the smoke deeply, and only then asked, "So what can we do to prove our innocence?"

"Don't ask me. I dunno."

"Come on, Chad-san. We know each other long enough to forego the probing part. So, your conditions, your wishes requiring our cooperation as exemplary citizens, whatever else you're after, just tell us your request already."

"That's not what it's about this time. Really. Rather, it's something for that man to decide."

"That man?"

"Daniel Monroe. He wants to see your mugs. So wag your tail at him the best you can, brats."

At the surprisingly big name that came up all of a sudden, Worick almost let the cigarette fall out of his mouth.

Daniel Monroe. The boss of the Monroe Family and a person of utmost importance to Ergastulum. Even among the 4 Godfathers, as they were called, who held the supreme power, he was incredibly influential. No one among those living in the city was allowed to defy him. In addition, Worick and Nicolas belonged to his mafia Family in the past.

"Why though? He's usually nice to Tags."

That man wasn't someone who would want to complain over something like getting the city rid of a bunch or two dealing in merch as revolting as that 'dynamite' or whatever it was called.

"The problem is, the scale isn't limited to just the Lombardi family."

"Now you're being a tease."

"Cause that info still has the top secret seal affixed on it for now. But if you ask me, it'll be on the news tomorrow's evening. In any case, until it's public, that's all I can say to you. Now good luck playing the fox."

Chad waved a hand like he was swatting a fly or something. The old-fashioned sedan hummed to life and took off.

Worick, too, waved his hand carefree, grimacing inwardly all the while.

The 4 Godfathers was not a name to be taken in vain. They were the base of this city's governing system, safeguarded by the rules. A city like Ergastulum was so unstable that it was like it walked a tightrope every day. And the 4 pillars that stretched said rope for it were the 4 Godfathers. Thanks to them exercising potent power, Ergastulum was able exist in some semblance of maintained balance.

But a problem — something huge enough to affect the city's foundations, at that — had occurred. It was extremely bothersome to get involved in that, but it looked like the Benriya had no option to stay out of it.

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Chad's prediction was on the money, and the next day's 7 p.m. news reported what he talked about.

Only, Worick and Nicolas didn't watch them.

The first reason amounted to the fact that they didn't have a TV in their office.

And the second one was because at that exact time they were busy responding to a dinner invitation Daniel Monroe had extended to them.

The place chosen for the friendly chat was a luxurious Italian restaurant that he himself owned. Pleasant lightning of orange shades whetted the appetite, enhancing the already delicious cuisine — or so the premise was supposed to be, but only a complete madman could lust after the food under the circumstances where they had been summoned here by Monroe personally. To Worick and Nicolas he was a former master and someone with whom they had supposedly built a stable relationship of mutual trust, so they were better off than most, but even they could not get rid of nervousness completely. Even Nicolas, for all of his mad dog tendencies, seemingly remembered his place as he sat across from Worick. The napkin on his neck looked totally out of place and resembled an animal collar.

Monroe folded slightly inwards a slice of pizza with one hand and bit off a mouthful, chasing the drooping mozzarella with his lips like a kid, speaking in between lightly like he was making a small talk.

"They're talking about it on TV right about now. Last weekend, 4 people died."

The mafia killings by the unidentified. Person or persons responsible had the same modus operandi as in the case with the annihilation of the Lombardi Family, also taking out the Capo Regime of other famous mafia families.

Worick, touching a drop of rose champagne, asked, "Did your group have any connection with the Lombardi family, too?"

"We had a gambling enthusiast. He wanted money badly and sold one of the Twilights. It's an embarrassing story. Twilights are considered members of the family, too. It'd make us look bad if one of them were to die an inappropriate death."

"Did you take that Twilight back?"

"Yes, we bought them back peacefully."

"I see. For the record, there's nothing between us and them, no emotions, no nothing. No antagonism either."

"And of course, no love."

"Apart from the general indiscriminate love for this city's naughty kids."

Monroe wiped his stained lips on a napkin.

"A team of kids who loved to play with fire getting crushed isn't where the problem lies. It's in the fact that the incidents of indiscriminate attacks on the mafia that had started with them didn't stop there."

Worick was tempted to ask how much of a problem that was but held his tongue. He didn't fancy to get caught asking Monroe stupid questions if he could help it. When before this man, he could relate a little to the feelings of a child seeking to earn good boy points with his parent. That's probably what it was to be utterly outclassed.

If whoever was behind the killings made an attempt on the members of the Monroe family, then laughing off that mafia hunting was not an option. The 4 Godfathers were this city's foundation, and trying to get a drop on them was a

taboo.

Monroe looked innocent but breathed out a genteel sigh.

"Youths these days are smart. They read Nietzsche in a bar. And when they get so smart, you can't tell if they're a fool underneath. Isn't that right?"

"In other words, there is a catch behind these mafia killings, and you're trying to sound out what it is, is that it?"

"Attacking us won't lead to anything good. But if they came assaulting us anyway, then there must be some benefits, 'something good' of another kind they stand to gain from it that makes it worthy the trouble."

"Oh my, what a dreadful story. Not something I could ever hope to replicate regardless of whether that 'something good' was money or power."

Monroe smiled.

"You seem to be suspected though?"

"Only due to an unfortunate misunderstanding."

"Indeed. I'm well aware of your neutrality. You don't side with anyone. It's just that neither Nietzsche nor Heidegger explain anything about you two's nature. Moreover, no matter how much one refines one's mind, what stands meaningful at the end of the day is hard facts you can touch with your hand."

One of Worick's cheeks twitched as he cracked a smile.

"Should we take that as a job request?"

"Did it sound that way to you?"

Monroe smiled, and his eyes, in a straight stare focused on Worick, were cloudless as a child's. It was beyond Worick's comprehension how a man who killed as easily as he breathed and was nearly killed as he slept at night could have such clear eyes. It was easy for Worick to believe that there was no malice towards him and his partner in the depth of those eyes, but the reason for that was because to Monroe the two were his cute ex-subordinates and useful pawns. He didn't want to give Monroe an answer that would lose them his trust.

Worick grabbed some pickles with clumsy fingers and sent them into his mouth. He feared to guess their price, but at the very least it had a few more zeroes in it than the stuff he munched on in the bar with Dario. It was truly

unfortunate that the circumstances didn't allow him to enjoy their taste properly.

"We're much obliged to you. It goes without saying that we will try to live up to your expectations to the best of our ability."

Now, the question was what exactly those expectations were. Would it be enough to give Monroe those mafia slayers' heads with a ribbon on them and a bouquet as a present? Or should they set up a table to sit the perps down with none of their limbs missing so that a talk with them was possible?

While Worick tried to imagine which would make Monroe happier, Nicolas, who was slowly carrying pasta to his mouth a few feet away from Worick, set the fork aside.

"YoUr coNdiTionS?" he asked — not with the sign language, he actually voiced the question.

Nicolas didn't use signs when communicating with Monroe. He, too, had certain rules set for himself. Since he could not properly regulate the volume of his voice and adjust how it sounded, his intonations were weird to the ear, but that's precisely why you could tell he was sincere.

Monroe smiled a gentle, kind smile as if to a dog that came to snuggle up to him. He put the slice of pizza he had only taken a single bite out of on the napkin and stood up.

"Cheap meat will taste bad no matter how you cook it."

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After the meeting with Daniel Monroe, it felt like the expensive food and wine the Benriya were served had vanished of its own accord, seemingly without entering Worick's stomach because the blond handyman's belly felt positively empty when he returned to the office and made a single call.

The person he called to was Dario. When they drank the night away a couple of days earlier, Dario forced Worick to take a box of matches of the hotel the short man was staying at. Worick had already thrown it away, but for better or for worse, he never forgot anything he once had laid his eyes on.

Having told the front desk clerk Dario's name, he set the receiver aside and smoked one of his Pall Malls. A couple of minutes later, he heard Dario's obnoxiously loud voice on the other end and picked up the receiver again, inviting him for a meal.

Dario immediately accepted. Naming a cheap Spanish bar as the meeting place, Worick hung up. He doubted Dario was too familiar with the city, but whatever, he'd figure something out.

Then Worick changed suits. From his best looking one to one that he didn't care if it got dirty a little — with blood and stuff. Waving a hand to Nicolas who had started his routine masochistic workout, Worick left the office.

When he arrived to the venue, the familiar vivid violet monstrosity had already been parked in front of it. That car looked out of place absolutely everywhere, he thought and smiled to himself lopsidedly.

Dario occupied the seats at the very back of the bar. At the sight of Worick, he raised a hand, grinning happily like he was reunited with an old friend.

When Worick first heard of the mafia killings, the first face that came up floating in his mind's eye was this innocent in its simple-mindedness mug. He had no basis. It just was that he couldn't put it past this guy who didn't even know Nietzsche's nationality to hold even the Monroe Family at gunpoint in the heat of the moment. Also, the fact that this man was an outsider who came to town only recently was suspicious. Generally, Twilights couldn't survive anywhere except Ergastulum, but there were known precedents of strays managing to survive in the gate cities for a while.

There existed rules obligatory for Twilights to uphold. They were known as the 3 rules.

The first one demanded that Twilights not cause intentional harm to humans. Also, they were not to harm humans by turning a blind eye to danger and destroying the balance.

The second one stated Twilights must obey humans' orders no matter what. An exception was to be made if the order given contradicted the first rule.

And the third rule allowed Twilights to defend themselves as long as the

action did not go against rules 1 and 2.

Among those, the most important demand was the clause about balance. And talking about balance was the same as talking about Daniel Monroe, one of the 4 Godfathers.

Twilights may have far outclassed Normals in physical prowess, but they were weak creatures who could not survive without Celebriter given to them by Normals. The higher a Twilight's rank was, the more they were aware of this gap in the standings. That's why the three principals were upheld by them. The circulation of Celebriter and ruling over Twilights through it was a major business to the mafia, and for that reason mafia killings by Twilights was the epitome of foolishness. Getting caught was only a matter of time, as well as obviously getting killed.

Chances of people who lived in this city long enough to run this kind of gig were very low. Common sense was something that was etched into one on the level of instincts over time. But Dario was a newcomer. It would not be strange for him to lack the brand of common sense this city required.

Hiding these suspicions behind a light and easy smile, Worick crossed to Dario. Dario gulped down whatever was left in his bottle of Corona and spread his arms like he expected a hug.

"This time you invited me! I'm honored."

"Was it a bother?"

"Nope. I don't have much to do all year round, and I usually just stroll around aimlessly during the day. You guys, on the other hand, seem like busy people."

For someone who allegedly only strolled around aimlessly, he had a bit of bags under his eyes. Worick ended up imagining the worst that could have stood behind that small lie. Except, in this guy's case, there was a whole lot of other possibilities. And actually, Dario pinched the skin between his eyes and said seriously and without a shadow of shame. "I watched too much porn." Acting out a mysterious persona would be out of character for a guy like that.

Worick took a seat and ordered double Old Parr along with Dario. For food, Worick just threw in whatever seemed okayish: gherkins and onion pickles, liver pate with oranges, lightly grilled marinaded mackerel — each of the

aforementioned was fairly decent in this bar.

After a toast, Dario, steering the ice cubes in his glass with his finger ill-mannered as ever, cocked his head to the side and asked, “Come to think of it, where’s the other half of your duo?”

“Nic may not look it, but he’s a hardworker, so working.”

No harm would have been done if Worick had just replied honestly about Nicolas working out back in their rooms. Mixing in that little lie, he gauged Dario’s reaction, except he didn’t get to see anything he might have wanted to see. Dario didn’t try to steal any suspicious glances at him in secret, nor did he try to look around in hopes of catching the sight of the Tag. It looked like he took Worick’s words at face value. He was someone with whom tricks and tactics were a waste of time, basically.

“Did Johann-chan get better?”

“Yeah, thanks to you. He only stayed in hospital for one night.”

“Then you should’ve brought him with you.”

“No. He’s not completely recovered yet. He’s bed-resting in our room.”

“Is it that bad?”

“No need to worry. It’s just that drinking with you will spiral out of control fast, and it ain’t good to make a wounded person drink so much.”

“Hey, hey, the last time it got out of control was because of you though.”

“Really? Oh well, whatever, the fact still stands,” he said and swished his Old Parr.

Worick started with pickles. This place’s pickles were yummy, even though they were too sweet, if you thought about it.

“Tell him to take better care of himself for me. As two bros with high-maintenance partners, having an in-depth discussion about burdens of nurturing them doesn’t sound too bad for today.”

Dario had already downed about a half of his double Old Parr. Letting out a moist breath, he laughed.

“Johann never caused me any trouble though.”

“He got himself injured just 3 days ago.”

“What, being picked on by some hoodlums counts as causing trouble? In that

case, I'm causing him a lot more trouble than vice-versa."

"Oh. You get in fights often?"

"I don't remember very well. Just new scars popping up on my body here and there before I know it."

"Man, what DO you even remember?"

"I remember that you saved Johann. And I remember my Fiat, the best car in the world. A posh babe complimented it."

"Ah yeah, long silky black hair and mile-long legs, right?"

"Yup. How did ya know?"

"Cause I heard all about it the other day."

They talked about it when he drank with Dario a few days ago. Although due to Dario being dead drunk at the time, his sentences were more like a string of disjointed words, but Worick still remembered.

"That so. Anyways, she was one fine woman. With a good taste, too. She pointed at it and said that face was cute."

"Cute? Your mug?"

"Moron, the Fiat's of course! And then on a sunny Sunday we drew the picture of the dog that broke its chains on the hood together."

Dario hoisted the now empty glass and hollered, "Hit me with another!"

Then he stuck a Garam between his lips and patted his pockets.

"I forgot the matches. Lend me yours."

"Just how forgetful are you, man."

"That's what's so good about me."

"Hey, you're not supposed to say that yourself."

Worick fished out his Zippo from the pocket, and Dario moved in closer. The bar's interior was dim, and for a fleeting moment the swaying light illuminated the short man's face. As he withdrew the lighter, Worick took the opportunity to light his Pall Mall as well.

"To put it simply, only really important things remain in my head. I only forget dull things, trifles. It's nice when it's so simple, no?"

"Oh really. Put yourself in the shoes of someone who's forced to listen to the same story again and again though, it's pretty unbearable, I gotta say. Johann-

chan probably sighs inside very often.”

“What d’ya mean, same story?”

“Like about that car of yours.”

“Oh, my Fiat. The best wheels praised by the best girl. I’ll drive it for my whole lifetime. The dog pic is also great.”

“Why a dog?”

“Oh, you’re interested? Shame though, ’cause I don’t remember.”

“Not that again.”

“The reason was something stupid then, is all. The fact that I drew it together with the best woman is what’s much more important. And on the hood, too. It’s like the important memories run just in front of me, always.”

The Pall Mall in Worick’s mouth bobbed.

“True, that’s great. Was she that great a woman?”

“Yeah, absolutely. Kind but with a pretty strong will. And smart, too. Not in studies, uh, how do I put it... her words were perky and smart every time.”

“But she praised that car.”

“That’s why. Can’t be helped if you don’t get how tasteful it is, but a nice guy ain’t gonna do something as lame as raining on others’ parade and insulting their prized possessions, right?”

“I’m sorry then. I got jealous of your fine girlfriend and poked fun at you a little.”

“I thought so. Alright, let’s have another drink. Hey, hit us with another! This stuff is good.”

“Wait up, ain’t you going too fast?”

“I’m in a good mood right now. I came to a new city, and I made a new friend. Can drinks taste better than on a night like this?”

Friend? That felt off to Worick, but he didn’t protest.

Instead, Worick, too, asked for another glass of Old Parr. He wouldn’t say that Dario’s drinking manners were necessarily good, but he didn’t think them bad either.

“How long have you been in town, remind me?”

“Mmm, about a week, I think? Something along these lines.”

“And how do you like Ergastulum? Pretty different from North Gate, no?”

"I wonder. It's pretty much the same everywhere. Stupid lot fixated on all the wrong uncool stuff doing as they please."

"Uncool stuff, huh. Like what?"

"I don't remember the proper names for stupid stuff like that. The general feeling, it's all about the general feeling, man. Like competing over the cost of their alcohol or clothes or having turf wars that are just pissing contests if you look closer, things like that is what I mean."

"And the stuff with Tags?"

"Huh? What Tags have to do with it?"

"Not much, you just seem like a guy who's free of the prejudice against them."

"Guys I don't give a crap about I don't a crap about. Whether they have tags or not is beside the point. But your partner ain't bad."

"I'm honored. And what did you like about him?"

"His eyes, in particular. That's one hell of a glare, I gotta say. He's real hungry, you can tell."

"True, Nic eats a lot."

"Dull guys are all sated already. If a guy next to you eats yummy stuff, it makes you wanna try it too. That kind of appetite is worthless though. But with a guy that's real hungry, that alone is enough to keep your eyes riveted. Catch my drift?"

"Vaguely, but yes."

Indeed, Nicolas was like a hungry beast. And what he was particularly hungry for was blood. A hunger for winning though? No, not so much. His was more pure, a hunger for violence.

Worick lit up another Pall Mall. Seeing it, Dario put a Garam in his mouth, too. Puffing out smoke, he smiled broadly.

"You though, I'm not really sure."

"What about me you're not sure of?"

"Whether you're hungry or sated already."

"I wonder myself. I feel I'm up for another slice of Margherita after this though."

Was Dario the mafia slayer?

If he was, he had to be a Twilight then. Except there were no tags on his

chest. Did Tags who threw away their tags even exist? No, that was out of question. Tags were bound tight by Celebrer, so doing that was the same as suicide to them. It was an act even more improbable in its eccentricity than an attempt on this city's balance.

Dario got thoroughly intoxicated in an hour and continued drinking for 2 more.

Worick came along for the ride, bracing himself for the imminent hangover.

When they exited the bar, it was drizzling. Because of the change in humidity and atmospheric pressure, it ached beneath the eyepatch and from that alone Worick was able to guess what kind of weather it was outside even when still being in the rowdy bar where it was impossible to hear the beating of rainfall.

Unable to watch Dario stumble around, having lost his sense of balance, he lent him a shoulder. Worick judged that Dario should sober up soon enough if left to sleep it off on the seat of that vivid violet monstrosity of his.

As Worick was trying to sit Dario down in the car parked in front of the bar, Dario's foot stepped in some dirt, leaving a muddy line on his trouser cuff.

"Hey, hey, don't get my suit dirty!" he barked.

"Your own fault 'cause you can't even stand on your feet. Try walking like a human being at least, a step with your right foot, then a step with your left."

"Nah, ain't happening."

"Why so high and mighty?"

"Good taste, ain't it."

"Huh?"

"Even the girl said so, back in the past."

"She praised your Fiat, not you though?"

"Huh? Well yeah, and we're talking about my Fiat here!"

"What about your suit?"

"Dun give a crap. It's a little cool, but that's it. Nothing compared to my Fiat."

"Well, you should give a crap. About that dirt at least."

"What? You dissin' my Fiat man?!"

"We're talking about your suit right now."

Worick finally managed to deposit Dario, limp and listless like a marionette off

its strings, onto the driver's seat of his car. As he did, a photo slipped out of the short man's chest pocket.

"Hey, you dropped something."

Worick picked it up and spared it a momentary glance. On it, he saw a bit younger Johann and a girl of 12–13.

"Yeah, sorry."

Dario took the photo from Worick very carefully and returned it to his chest pocket.

"Is that the girl who praised your Fiat?"

It didn't look like it at all. Worick asked the question in jest.

"Kid bro's l'il sis."

"Oh. So not yours, then."

"I've no sisters."

Dario and Johann seemed like siblings but they weren't blood related. So why did Dario have the picture of a girl who was his self-styled little brother's sister? Worick felt curious but he didn't think he'd be able to pull anything worthwhile on the subject out of the intoxicated Dario.

After a while, Dario put both hands on the steering wheel. Head lowered, he mumbled quietly, "It stinks."

"Yeah. 'Cause you reek of alcohol."

"Not that. Another smell."

"Some good nose you have, you drunkard."

From behind, rustling of tyres on wet pavement came. A black sedan appeared — a cheap looking one at that. It passed by the side of the violet monstrosity, swiveled its rear end by 90 degrees and blocked the front.

In the black sedan, 5 people rode. From the driver's seat and the passenger seat, 2 men came out. From the back seat, 2 women and another man. All in boring uniformed suits. Like their black sedan, they thoroughly lacked individuality.

Combing his hair, wet with the rain, Worick inquired, "I heard nothing of the

plans to close this road any time soon?"

The men didn't answer, just drew their guns.

Worick promptly threw the Fiat's door open as far as it could go and, with it as the shield, ran backward, putting some distance between the men and himself. They fired. 2 shots put cracks into the glass of the door's window. Worick didn't feel any pain blossom anywhere in his body. Looked like they had missed then.

Rolling across the wet ground, he hid behind a dirty concrete-block wall. Having readied his Colt Government, he peeked from behind his cover to check the enemy position.

Ueh, a stupid sounding voice came.

Dario, with steps lacking any hesitation, was coming closer straight to the man who had just fired at his car. He was a perfect practice target, but the man apparently forgot how to pull the trigger, probably from the shock, a dumbfounded expression on his face.

"Hey. Because of you I sobered up, and I don't like it."

Indeed, neither Dario's voice nor gait was faltering anymore. Except doing what he was currently doing could only be attributed to alcohol making him lose all reason.

"What have you done, you bastard?"

Dario indicated with his eyes the cracked glass of the Fiat's window.

Like it was the time for that! Worick couldn't help clicking his tongue. Wait, could it be that Dario simply didn't find this situation dangerous? If he was a Tag, it made some sense. If, say, it was Nicolas in his place, mere 5 Normals trying to charge him head-on would be no match to him, no matter how many handguns they toted around.

At last, one of the suited bandits — the woman standing in the back — took Dario at gunpoint, probably finally remembering her mission. But, before she could pull the trigger, Worick fired. A few seconds after the gunshot resounded, the woman's body collapsed. She thought she fired the gun in her hand, yet

found blood dying her own right shoulder. Worick wasn't any good at sniping, probably due to missing the left eye.

In any case, Dario was still fine, but the situation deteriorated from bad to worse. Now two suited thugs, having regained their fighting spirit, pointed their guns at Dario. The remaining two apparently didn't bring guns. They instead had batons which didn't go well with their suits. Seeing that, Dario, too, tried to take out the Cold Woodsman from where it was tacked at his belt, but by all accounts, he had no chance to make it in time.

Worick was about to make his escape while he had the chance, but before he could, a voice in his head — maybe that of reason or of curiosity — whispered, 'Don't you want to find out how Dario plans to get out of this sticky spot?'

Would it turn into some bizarre shootout contest of speed drawing? Or would he dodge the bullets with his superhuman physical ability? Both possibilities were plenty feasible in case he was a Twilight.

When Worick thought of that, his feet stopped dead in their tracks. He simply couldn't imagine that Dario had nothing up his sleeve. His actions completely lacked the self-preservation instinct, after all.

4 gunshots immediately followed.

Each of the two suited thugs fired 2 shots. Dario didn't fire even one. He didn't move from his spot either. 3 out of 4 shots missed, but the last bullet sunk into his thigh.

—He's seriously got nothing?! You gotta be shitting me, dammit all!

Dario dropped his Cold Woodsman and collapsed to his knees where he stood. The two muzzles followed the movement, sliding down. Worick just pulled the trigger. He didn't really try to aim, but luckily for him one shot hit something. Before checking what, he leaped out of the wall's protection and, continuing preventive barrage, ran to Dario, wrapping an arm around the man's waist when he reached him.

It helped a lot that Dario's body was small. Rolling with the momentum, Worick pulled the body into a narrow alley. Simultaneously, a barrage of bullets was unleashed on the two of them, as if a dam got broken. One of the bullets

grazed Worick's shoulder. The wound wasn't deep, but it did send a wave of pain like high fever crawling across his skin. Gritting his teeth, he endured it and, getting up, straightened his stance. Peeping from behind the wall, he fired another shot to intimidate the enemy. The heat of pain ran rampant across his shoulder.

"My leg hurts," Dario complained mumblingly.
"Hell if I care."

He lay collapsed on the wet ground, and Worick grabbed him by the nape of his neck and pulled.

"C'mon, sober up, man, seriously. Please, Dario."
"I'm not drunk anymore. But I'm a lucky man, y'know. Besides, after what they did to my Fi—"
"Listen up, you Psycho Stripes." Worick pushed the gun against Dario's chest.
"This ain't baccarat, and I've no intention of leaving my life in your hands along with the money. If you don't wanna bite it, take this seriously."
"I'm serious like never before, I'm telling ya. When did I ever horse around?"

Dario shrugged, not giving the gun at his chest even a passing thought, like always.

—Was this really his serious mode?

Worick couldn't tell. But for putting on an act, his body was too tense. The stripes of his suit were dark where the bullet hit him in the thigh.

Worick, pissed off at Dario's uselessness or maybe at his own untimely curiosity, clicked his tongue.

"Is the marble grip this year's trend?"
"I've no hobby of discussing fashion fads."

Dario was unfazed as always, but his Colt Woodsman lay on the ground right in the middle of the under fire area, not looking like it could be of use to them anytime soon. They were outnumbered and outgunned. At this rate, their situation would only get worse and worse. Worick wanted to take to his heels already, but running around with this limping marble grip fan wasn't something he particularly wanted to try out. So what should he do then.

Just as he was busy recalling the map of their surroundings, he heard suspicious sounds coming from behind them, joining the booming of the gunfire.

Dario was the first to hear them, calling Worick's name. Worick span around, pointing his gun in the direction. Drawing closer was one man with a baton. The wound on Worick's shoulder hurt. He pulled the trigger. The muzzle of the gun shook. The bullet lodged into the concrete wall with a high-pitched swoosh. Worick didn't get to fire a second shot. Inside the strangely slowed down time, the man's baton connected with Worick's forehead.

His world growing hazy, Worick tried to aim his Colt Government again. Only, Worick's consciousness slipped before he could pull the trigger.

*

Worick naturally couldn't accurately determine how long he had been unconscious, but if he had to guess, probably 15 or 20 minutes, something along those numbers.

It was painful to lie with his nose squashed against the concrete floor, so he forced his body to turn.

It looked like he was thrown into some stale garage. It was a spacious place you could park 4 cars in, except there were no cars. In the first place, the space looked mostly empty. There were a few wine bottles on the floor, and a few old wooden crates lined up along the wall. And that was all. The place had one exit, draped with a big but frail-looking shutter door. There were small windows for lighting, but their size was not big enough for a person to fit through.

Worick was surrounded by 3 suited thugs. Out of the 5 of them that got out of that car, 2 got hit by bullets, so the number added up, except among the 3 was the woman that Worick shot in the right shoulder. In which case, one other was sleeping on the bed, and one more was outside, guarding the perimeter.

Worick's hands and feet were tied, but nothing gagged him, preventing him from speaking. Choosing a random thug out of the 3 currently looking down at him, he used the chance and spoke up, "Is this a no smoking area? I'd like you to take out a cig from my pocket and let me smoke it if it's not."

The woman with the bandaged shoulder approached him, her heels tapping against the floor sharply.

"I'll give you something that's far more effective than nicotine."

The sole of her shoe stomped on Worick's cheekbone.

Swallowing the iron-tasting liquid in his mouth, he considered his situation.

—They didn't kill him.

The easiest and most obvious reason for that would be them wanting to use him as a hostage against Nicolas. If 4–5 Normals were to take on a Twilight, using a hostage was a viable option. Twilights were like beasts, but due to Celebriter and society's effects, they allowed themselves to be tamed on a deep-seated instinct. In the extreme case scenario, if Worick said die, Nicolas might just die. That said, it was pretty unthinkable for Nicolas to allow himself to be forced into submitting through something like holding Worick at gunpoint. It didn't feel much like a dangerous crisis as long as they could think smart. If there was a problem, it was in the fact that having to wait for Nicolas to come and save him like some damsel in distress was very lame.

Chuckling to himself, Worick asked, "What are you gonna do with me now that you have me?"

The one to answer him was the woman with bandaged shoulder again.

"Use you for what you're worth, then kill you. Otherwise, it won't pay off." "Was your suit that I ruined that expensive? In that case, I did very wrong by you, eh."

The woman grimaced in displeasure and kicked Worick in the stomach. The hit wasn't all that strong, probably because she was rather light in terms of weight, but his forehead struck by the baton earlier and the shot shoulder throbbed in pain.

"That's right. It was something a man bought me, and now he can't buy me anything anymore. The way he laughed was vulgar and got on my nerves, but he had the ability and talent necessary to be appointed as the Capo Regime of a mafia family. He had a future and could make it big."

Worick shook his head. “We’re not the mafia slayers you’re looking for though.”

This woman and her helpers must have been hit hard. It looked like the rumors about Worick and Nicolas being the ones behind the killings spread a lot wider than Worick had originally thought.

“At the very least, it’s beyond doubt that you hunted down the survivors of the Lombardi Family.”

“They swooped down on us out of the blue, attacking us first. It was an unfortunate misunderstanding. And actually, we’re after those mafia slayers ourselves.”

“Oh really. Who’s backing you? What are you trying to achieve by upsetting this city’s balance?”

“We’re doing nothing of the sort. I swear. We’ve no complicated connections to hide, and we’re not trying to do anything to Ergastulum.”

“But you keep in touch with a suspicious outsider not from the city.”

She was talking about Dario. If Worick confirmed that yes, Dario was suspicious, would he get a chance to get out of his current predicament in one piece? But Dario was too weak. And Johann was the same, getting totally beat up by puny thugs. There was too little basis to suspect them of being the mafia slayers.

So Worick could only shake his head.

“We just happened to drink together.”

“And you also just happened to invalidate my means of procuring new suits by sending my man to his grave.”

“Nope, that doesn’t sound right. I don’t even know your man, and it goes without saying that I didn’t kill him.”

Was Dario okay? Realizing that he was worried a little about the guy, Worick smiled a bitter smile. It wouldn’t have come to this if it wasn’t for that idiot in the first place.

Worick didn’t think he gave the woman any reason, but she went and kicked him in the abdomen again.

Spitting, the woman said, “Whatever. I disliked you for a long time anyway.

Getting all cocky and setting up the Benriya business, playing house with a Tag, such a hypocrite. What, did you think that Tags would become normal human beings if you just patted their head kindly?"

Worick had to laugh at that, "What is a normal human being, exactly?"

No matter what he said, they wouldn't kill him right away, he guessed. However street-level they may have been, a mafia was a mafia. Worick had no doubt they knew all the ways how to make use of a captive.

"Is someone who buys into a misunderstanding, fires her gun left and right on said wrong assumption, scrunches up her face like some ugly salted Bacalada [*] and throws a tantrum because of a stain on some suit a normal human being?"

The woman glared death down at Worick, not bothering to hide her rage. She pulled her gun out with her left hand clumsily.

"I'm right-handed, but my right arm is unusable for the time being, your courtesy, so I'll have to make do with what I have. I'll fire 6 shots. If any happen to hit you, well, sorry."

So that was how she was going to play. Maybe this woman wasn't as composed as Worick had hoped. And that was why dealing with a hysterical woman was never a walk in the park.

If worst came to worst, he would die here, Worick realized. Oddly enough he wasn't too terrified of the prospect, although he did find such a death quite silly.

The woman disengaged the safety.

Directly after, a deafening booming much like an explosion came, and the shutter door got smashed to pieces.

The person to appear was... not Nicolas.

The first thing that came in sight was the clumsily painted dog with its wide inappropriate grin, followed by the rest of the vivid violet monstrosity.

In the blink of an eye, the dented front of that tasteless car crashed into the man who stood near the shutter and sent him flying. The hood got warped, and the dog's sneer got even wider. That mad dog went straight to where Worick

was, hitting another man on the way. The wheels on the right side flipped up the wooden crates by the wall. The woman, features twisting, managed to jump out of the way anyhow. Behind the broken windshield Worick's eyes met those of Dario on a smiling face that was very much like that of the dog on his car. Bound, Worick couldn't move. The car skidded, sparks flaring up where the sunk hood scrapped against the concrete. The sparks stopped right before Worick's nose.

The wooden crates came falling down, crashing with jingly sounds. The skidding tyres left black marks and a burnt smell in their wake. Dario briskly threw the door open. The resulting puff of air tousled up Worick's bangs.

"Yo, my friend. Alive there?"

Dario was bleeding from the forehead. Probably from the cuts the windshield inflicted upon breaking or something. He got out of the car — more like clumsily slid off the seat, actually — and, producing a knife with some difficulty, cut the ropes binding Worick.

Worick cracked a smile. "Why are you here?"

"I told ya, didn't I. You're in luck. You saved Johann, after all. Next, it's my turn to save you."

"So you remembered that, huh."

"I don't forget important things."

"It's your fault that I got caught though."

"Is it?"

Gunfire resounded. It was probably the woman who fired, but sadly for her, the bullet's trajectory curved and it went through the hood, right between the dog's eyes. Dario took out his Colt Woodsman. But evidently, he had pushed himself too much, having no strength to grip it properly, and it ended up slipping out of his hands.

Worick snatched the Colt Woodsman off the ground and fired.

He didn't really aim properly, but blood stained the woman's chest. Worick decided to take it as his design succeeding and leave it at that.

Spinning the Cold Woodsman about the index finger thrust in the trigger hole, he held it out to Dario, and Dario put it back into the holster on his waist, his

energy apparently sapped dry as he threw himself down, sprawling on the hard concrete.

"I'm hurting all over. This is a serious wound, y'know? Hurry up and take me to hospital already."

"Wait up a sec. I'm totally beat myself."

Worick took out a Pall Mall. Dario did the same, still sprawled on the ground as he stuck a Garam into his mouth. Worick lit up both cigarettes.

Like the cigarettes, the vivid violet dog-faced monstrosity spat out puffs of black smoke. Its engine was done for, it seemed.

"A pity about your Fiat."

"Ah? Why?"

"It was your prized possession."

"Yeah..."

Dario glanced at it, his eyes meeting those of the intrepid dog.

"I already forgot all about it."

Worick closed his eyes for a while, offering a silent prayer to the vivid violet monstrosity and the picture of the dog on it. Finished, his fingers closed on the cigarette, taking it from between his lips and ashing it.

"Have you ever read Nietzsche?"

"Nietzsche? Who's that? A porn star?"

"That's right. A very arousing one that has all the youths captivated."

The mafia slayers. The outlaws violating Ergastulum's rules. If you thought about it seriously and rationally, they were vicious criminals with unknown connections and backers.

But looking at the facts from a fool's viewpoint, it could almost appear like they were just a bunch of people getting around and killing those they didn't like.

"For pinups, the bigger the ass the better, for me," Dario muttered.

"Sorry, dunno the size of Nietzsche's behind," Worick returned.

Ash from the cigarette fell on Dario's face as he made no attempt to change

his sprawling position, and he frowned grumpily.

T/N: Bacalada = stockfish

Chapter 3

After leaving the garage where the sneering dog rampaged to its heart's content, it took Worick about 2 hours to make it back to the Benriya office.

Johann was waiting in front of the garage, so Worick dumped Dario, who didn't even make an attempt to walk with his own two feet, on him. That said, since Worick had sustained some wounds himself, he needed to drop by Theo's clinic along with the two, as well.

He had Nina dress his wounds, and when he returned to the office, Nicolas turned to him, gracing him with an annoyed look. Lying on the couch, he pressed a glass bottle of carbonated water to his lips. Having taken 2 gulps, he put it on the table.

After that, Nicolas held his right fist in front of his face and, bending his wrist, banged it against the left side of his chest. Then he made a motion like he wanted to grab his head with the whole of his right hand.

'What are you fucking up for, idiot.'

Seemingly satisfied with just that, he took a shish-kebab out of the paper bag left on the floor and bit into it.

"Whatcha eating?"

'Salted grilled fish. Bought it from a street stall.'

Worick cracked a smile.

"Really. Yummy?"

'Passable.'

"How carefree of you when I was being put through some really awful experience. What if I died?"

'You're still alive though.'

Nicolas got up from the couch and threw the skewer the kebab he had finished in a flash was on in the trash can. The long stick fell with a small clunk, joining 2 more like it already in the trash can.

'Speaking of, don't go wandering around alone if you know you're being targeted, moron.'

"Don't look so cold, c'mon. It's part of the job."

Worick plopped down on the other couch next to the one Nicolas was occupying. Nicolas gazed at him expressionless.

'Is he the mafia slayer?'

"Who knows. I'm not sure yet."

'I thought you took a shine to him.'

"Did it look that way? I'm just really good at getting close to strangers, is all."

Worick lit up a Pall Mall. Lifting a corner of his mouth, he flashed a nasty smirk.

"You suck at dealing with him, don't ya."

'I just don't like him, is all. For some reason.'

"Haha, way to be blunt. Not that I don't get what you mean though."

Taciturn Nicolas and talkative Dario were the polar opposites. But at the same time, Worick had a feeling that their sets of values were surprisingly very similar. If it looked like Worick was being friendly with Dario, that had to be the reason why.

Both of the short men didn't give a damn about the rules of society. They had their internal set of iron-clad rules, which was linked with instincts rather than reason. Nicolas' rules originated in his having been born a Twilight and formed under the effects of his complicated upbringing. With Dario though, Worick couldn't tell for sure. But he could venture a guess that Dario, too, had a past of some controversial kind that cut into his neck like a chain. Because he was unhealthily obsessed with the past. In the form of 'forgetting', to be exact. It was the same as with a child's puppy love. Peering hard and avoiding to look at all costs bore the same meaning in that context, denoting the overwhelming obsession with the object.

Or, alternatively, perhaps Nicolas' disagreeable sentiment could be attributed to a natural dislike towards one of the same kind. —Well, if we started talking unsightly past and criticizing people for it, I'd be on the list, too, Worick admitted to himself with a strained smile.

"But don't let it be said that I haven't learned my lesson. So now I want you to stick by me, Nic-chan. Protect me from the scary-scary people, partner."

'Hell if I care. Learn to protect yourself with your own power.'

"Oh, don't sulk."

'I don't.'

Worick blew out the cigarette smoke in Nicolas' direction, and the shorter man grimaced not unlike a dog.

Nicolas would protect Worick no matter what. Even if it meant putting his own life on the line. And there could hardly be any doubt that the feelings driving him to do so were neither those of friendship nor those of duty. It was more like something that was part of the instincts etched into his essence.

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Evidently, Worick accumulated too much fatigue because the next day he slept in until noon. He felt he had dreamed of a woman but didn't really remember.

He woke up with a dull headache, maybe from the hangover, maybe from having been hit in the head. His shoulder, grazed by the bullet yesterday, stung when he was taking a shower. But since the wound could be written off as a mere scratch, he didn't feel much inconvenience even when washing his head.

Leaving the office together with Nicolas, Worick had a kebab sandwich bought from a street stall for lunch. Fashionably late by 10 minutes to the appointment with inspector Chad for that reason, he spent another 10 minutes trying to ignore the gratuitous lecturing the good inspector subjected him to.

20 minutes in total later than planned, they finally got to the main issue at hand.

"Geez. Making me waste my energy on garbage disposal day after day." Chad scowled while puffing on his Hope cigarette.

The meeting place was the interrogation room, found in a corner of the police station and plastered with wanted posters of all kinds of scoundrels.

Worick, cheek resting on his hand, managed to shrug his shoulders without changing his pose.

"We're fans of tidiness ourselves. Right, partner?"

'I've nothing to do with it,' Nicolas' hands signed.

"The 5 guys yesterday, what family did they belong to?" Worick asked Chad.

"The Bandera family."

"Oh. A place pretty high on the totem poll."

"They're street-level. Then again, they were just lapdogs of their heavy-hitting Capo Regime."

"And that Capo Regime got offed by the mafia slayers."

That's how the story had to go, given the hysterical woman's words.

Chad nodded.

"His corpse was found the day before yesterday. Shot through the head at home in his own bed. Along with the women serving as his body pillows. There were 7 people and 1 dog in that house. Only the dog survived."

"So they weren't slain with a bladed weapon?"

One of the big reasons why Worick and Nicolas were set up as the fall guys for the mafia killings was because the murder weapon was a blade.

"You're not off the hook though, your weapon of choice is Colt Government, forgot?"

Chad ground out his Hope cigarette, smoked up to the filter, on the cheap ashtray of stainless steel and stuck a new one in his mouth.

"Chad-san, ain't you smoking a bit too much?"

"Shuddup. There's a talk going round that soon smoking at the station will be banned. So I smoke while I can."

'Ain't it high time you retired though?' Nicolas' hands moved, a wicked smirk on his face.

Chad smacked him on the head.

"Like I can with the shitty brats severely lacking discipline around!"

'Why are you always taking it out only on me?'

"So?" Worick, following suit, lit up a Pall Mall. "How hairy the situation is right now, exactly? For how long will the Bandera family be after my head, in your opinion?"

"The Monroe family is indirectly holding them down for now. But only indirectly."

"Yeah, figures."

Daniel Monroe was this city's mighty power balancer. It figured that he couldn't possibly play favorites and openly back up the Benriya who were but two puny individuals. The request he had placed with them was in part purely meant to protect them — at least that's what Worick thought.

Chad took a deep drag out of his cigarette through the filter, breathed out a cloud of white smoke, then spoke.

"Every time new blood starts flowing, you two gain more hatred and grudges against you. And those grudges are quite tangible. You get what I mean, right?"

"Mn. I get that you're worried about us, Chad-san."

"Shuddup. I just don't wanna see this fucked up city get fucked up more than it already is."

Worick let out a puff of smoke too, and flicked the ashes off his cigarette over the ashtray.

"Yesterday's evening, did the mafia slayers hit again?"

"Got no such reports for the time being. Excluding the five you've wasted, that is."

"Five?"

Worick only shot two. And only one of those was dead beyond any doubt. He didn't know the fate of the other one. Additionally, Dario ran over 2 more. Even if all of them bit the dust, it totaled to 4 bodies. The numbers didn't add up.

"All 5 are confirmed dead?"

"Yeah. 2 on the street, 3 in the garage. What, did you want a confirmation of your feats?"

"Well, I was really drunk yesterday, so."

Did it mean that Dario killed at least one, possibly two while Worick was unconscious? If so, the numbers would add up. Except how could he do it, with his gun out of reach and his leg hit by a bullet?

At the guess that popped up in his head as he tried to solve that puzzle,

Worick couldn't help but laugh.

—Was Dario putting on an act?

Really, now? Where the acting ended, then?

Stubbing out the Pall Mall on the ashtray, Worick scratched his head.

In any case, the situation was still deteriorating. Slowly but surely, like a swamp you kept sinking into.

"I want the list of the clients the Lombardi family pushed their 'dynamite' to. You've investigated them, like you were supposed to, right?"

That was the start of the mafia killings. The only clue they had that could be called more or less solid was that 'dynamite'.

Chad, however, shook his head.

"We're still investigating."

"How sloppy. Didn't those guys keep records?"

"That's not it. There's no doubt they were a family particular to death about every penny. It's just that someone apparently made off with all of the records on their 'dynamite' deals."

"Oh. Makes you wonder just who it could be."

The answer to that was obvious as obvious got — the mafia slayers. And with that, it only stood to reason to suspect that they acted on a personal grudge. A grudge having to do with the 'dynamite' — if the perp was a Twilight, a myriad of valid answers why came to mind.

"What about other documents?"

"We've rounded up all the paper scraps we could find at the Lombardi family's place, from threatening letters that sounded like a kid's writing to pinups from the walls. Wanna take a gander?"

"Yeah," Worick nodded and glanced at Nicolas.

Probably bored of the long talk, the dark-haired man was entertaining himself with reshuffling the wanted posters on the walls. It looked like he was lining them up in order of the amount of hair, so now one corner sported a herd of shaved headed thugs.

“Nic-chan. Sorry, but could you play by yourself for a little longer?”

‘I’m already bored of it.’

“Next try lining them up in order of their nose size then.”

‘What fun is that?’

At this rate, it wouldn’t be too odd if he went off somewhere on his own. Only, right now, Worick didn’t want them to go anywhere separately.

“Gimme just 5 more minutes. I’ll be done right away.”

He had no idea how much was there to go through, but just flipping through all the papers shouldn’t take much time in any case. And Worick didn’t forget anything he had laid his eyes upon once. He could recall it perfectly any time he wanted. He would ponder on the content of those documents later.

“This way,” Chad rose up from his chair.

Approximately 10 minutes later, the two Benriya exited the police station.

Having found a florist’s that carried violets, Worick bought a bundle of them, planning to drop by Dario’s hospital room. An armful of flowers for a get-well visit paid to someone like Dario felt jarringly out of place, but popping up there empty-handed was even worse.

Dario, lying on a bed on the second floor of Theo’s clinic, was reading a book out of having nothing better to do, but lifted his head when he caught sight of the two handymen.

“Yo, my friends. Came to invite me for a drink again?”

“This is a get-well visit. Since you got worked over pretty good.”

“Ooh, thanks for the trouble.”

Dario put the wrapping of a used up book match in place of a bookmark and shut the book.

“Whatcha reading?”

“Ah, this. A fairy-tale that girl — Nina-chan, was it — brought me, trying to be thoughtful.”

“Oh yes, Nina-chan.”

“Yeah, she’s such a good girl. And she’s got skills. She’ll turn into one fine woman one day, I’m telling ya.”

"Agreed wholeheartedly," Worick said, then raised his brows. "Wait, what, were you crying?"

There were traces of tears in the outer corners of Dario's eyes.

"Hm? Well, yeah." Not embarrassed in the slightest, Dario help up the book. "It's an eastern book. I looked down on it at first 'cause it's for kids, but it's awesome."

Worick laughed.

A guy who failed to give a damn about guns pointed at him and ran over 2 people with his beloved car even after having been shot in the leg, cried over a kids' fairy-tale.

It was clearly weird, but when you saw this guy, somehow it made sense and seemed only natural.

Worick felt Nicolas clap him on the shoulder.

'I'll be outside,' the deaf man signed disinterestedly. 'If something happens, gimme some signal.'

Nicolas sniffed, nose twitching. The smell of rubbing alcohol must have been getting to him. The second floor had 4 beds and looked a lot more like a hospital than the floor below. Worick nodded his okay.

"Give these to Nina-chan as a present then."

Nicolas spared a look at the bouquet Worick held out, and took it with a sigh. Throwing the flowers over his shoulder, he walked away.

Dario gave Worick a coarse sneer from his bed.

"I did praise that girlie, but trying to seduce a girl that little?"
"If I wanted to seduce her, I'd give her those flowers myself. She's Nic-chan's pair. And the flowers are for your Fiat. They're of the matching color."

"You're giving flowers to a car? That's weird."

"That car's my lifesaver. It put its body on the line to save me."

"A car is a car. It's useful, sure, but it's only a tool. It got nothing on your own two legs."

It seemed like Dario really did forget all about the Fiat. Or, at the very least,

he revealed no sign of being sad about losing it.

"How do you like this hospital?" Worick asked.

Dario shrugged. His features twisted — did his wound hurt, perhaps?

"I like it good enough. Johann does, too. The doc doesn't talk much, thankfully."

"Aren't you bored without someone to talk to?"

"Guess so. Than again, it's much better than doctors doing nothing but throwing questions at you."

"Oh. That's a surprise."

"What is?"

"I thought you loved talking."

"A talk with doctors is never any good."

"Really? Doctors talk so they could heal you. It's their work and their duty."

"And I don't like that. They come asking you questions about your health for the record. 'How are feeling, Dario-san?' I don't fuckin' know how I'm feeling, that's why I'm paying you big money to examine me and find out! What the hell's with dumping everything on the patient, what are you, a quack or something?"

The corners of Worick's mouth lifted up. True, Theo was a man of few words and also skilled. Although he was also a corrupt doctor, for a portion of his patients he was probably close to the ideal.

For about 5 minutes after that, Dario continued to vocally complain about hospitals, only pausing for breathing. That the smell of cresol used for disinfection for some reason was similar to Bowmore he had had in the Spanish bar, that the flavor of the food served to him was flat and it was more like fishfood than something meant for humans, and so on and so forth, but on the other hand, it seemed like he had no dissatisfaction with this clinic and even expressed roundabout gratitude to it, going by his comparison with other hospitals.

When the short man's tongue took a short break at last, Worick spoke up, "There's something I wanted to ask."

"Yeah, what is it?"

"About yesterday. What happened?"

"What d'you mean 'what'?"

"To be honest, when I came to in that garage, I was 80–90% sure that you'd departed from this world for good. If they hadn't captured you, then you had to be dead. Yet, you turned up alive. It's also a mystery to me how you even found where they took me."

When Dario swooped in to save him yesterday, Worick's suspicions about his being the mafia slayer got somewhat stronger.

The man himself was probably not strong, or skilled by any stretch of imagination. He was lucky, sure, but that was all he had going for him. And yet, he somehow had pulled through a really sticky spot and even saved Worick. So Worick naturally found himself suspecting that the man had some special ability or something of the sort that wasn't immediately visible to Worick.

"You wanted to ask about something that trivial?" Dario laughed. "I'm a lucky man."

"So your luck is to thank for absolutely e~verything, you say?"

"Everything's up to luck. Stumbling upon an apple tree when you're hungry and have no money is luck, finding a wallet on the road is luck, meeting a friend that treats you to a meal is luck. See? Yesterday, as luck had had it, Johann turned up to help."

Worick had guessed that much. After all, Johann was outside the garage, waiting for Dario to come out.

"That pampered kid? Why though?"

"Dunno. I was out cold for a while. Ask Johann."

This man said absolutely lame things with impossible grandeur.

"Even if so, it doesn't explain how you had located that garage."

"That'd be 'cause nose knows."

"Nose?"

"Yup, nose. I can tell the smell of good luck and of bad luck. And Johann—"

But there, he was interrupted with a knock on the door.

It was Nina. On her tray, there were two bottles with orange juice and a vase with the violets arranged in it.

"D-Did I interrupt you?"

Worick sighed and shook his head.

"Not really, we were just chatting about silly things."

Nina smiled and put the vase by the window. Then she deposited one bottle of orange juice on the side table by the bed. Worick took the other.

"Thanks. You're so considerate."

"No, it's not me. These are from Johann-san."

Worick looked at Dario.

"I asked him. Y'know, to go shopping for me a little and stuff. What's he doing?"

"He's downstairs, talking with Nico."

"Ooh," Dario smiled in surprise. "I can't imagine what kind of conversation they could be having."

Worick had to agree. In contrast with Nicolas and his mad dog tendencies, Johann was like a chihuahua kept by a refined Madame. But for what it was worth, they were the savior and the saved, so holding a formal conversation on that account out of common courtesy was probably not impossible.

After Nina bowed and left the room, Dario changed the subject.

"You see, Johann came to this town to find his l'il sister. His sis is like the reason for living to him."

"That girl in the photo you keep?"

"Yeah, that's her. They got separated some time ago due to some rotten circumstances. And recently, we finally found out that she's somewhere in this city."

From how Dario worded it and from the real reason why they had to come to this city, Worick incurred that the girl in the photo was not in a position that set the mind at ease about her well-being.

"Didn't Johann-chan come to this city because he was free though?"

"Him? Did he tell you that himself?"

"No, you told me that. You really forget everything, huh."

"Oh, I see. Oh well, it does sound like something I'd say."

"What does it mean though?"

"Just what it sounds like."

Dario yawned sleepily, apparently not immune to losing strength due to an injury. Then he added in a voice that somehow sounded a little vacant, "Being free is nice and stuff, but there are all kinds of limitations. You keep getting hungry for as long as you live, and require sleep, too. And if you get pumped full of lead, sometimes you end up dying."

"That's right. Although I was under the impression that you didn't know that."

"Everyone has a chain hanging around their neck. But if you got to chose where the limitations trap you, that's freedom. He pinned it on his sister. Catch my drift?"

"Yeah, loud and clear at that."

"In that case, there you have it."

Dario closed his eyes.

"Think you can find that girl?" Worick inquired.

He didn't hope to get an answer, but Dario did reply, if mumblingly, "Yeah, without fail. I'm a lucky man, after all."

"How?"

"Dunno. Ask Johann."

He was sound asleep the second the words left his mouth, breathing peacefully. Having gotten off his chest all he had to say, he went and fell asleep just like that. Like a child.

Worick moved the side table with the bottle of orange juice on it out of the way so that even if Dario tossed and turned in his sleep, his hand wouldn't bump into it. Then, after putting a bedsheets round Dario, he left the sickroom.

When Worick came down to the first floor, he didn't find Nicolas or Johann there. Instead, there stood Theo, leaning against the wall and blowing out cigarette smoke.

"Where's Nic-chan?"

"No idea."

"And where's Johann-chan?"

"No idea either. I'm not their baby-sitter."

Worick came closer and leaned against the wall next to the doctor as well, taking out a Pall Mall.

"Lately, we've been imposing on you a lot. You have my gratitude."

"Don't need it. I'll take money over gratitude any day. Besides, it didn't eat up much of my time, so it's fine. His wounds aren't serious."

"He got shot in the leg and then charged into a garage head-first. You can't tell that his wounds aren't serious."

"Even so, none of his wounds would have any lasting effect."

"You can tell just by looking that the guy is tenacious. I'm glad that luck is on his side."

"In that case, his companion is luckier."

"Johann-chan?"

Theo nodded.

"When he stayed overnight for examination, he was up all night enduring."

"Was it that bad?"

"It's still bad. And won't heal. For now, he's just lucky to be able to move at all. Like with that partner of yours, those are some high-maintenance mess of a body they have."

Worick raised his brow, dubious. "A Tag?"

Face wiped off all expression, Theo blew out the smoke. "Did you bring him here without knowing? I can't believe you."

Worick scratched his cheek.

—Nose knows, Dario said. Per his admission, he could tell the smell of good luck and of bad luck, and Johann...

Just what smell could Johann tell?

"How bad is it looking for that baby-faced boy?"

"If he's alive 2 years from now, it'll be some really potent good luck, amazing enough to call it a miracle."

"Why though? It's not because of the wound he sustained the other day, is it?"

"Partly because of his odd compensation. But mainly due to the reckless use of

Celebrer."

There was no lack in Tags weakened by Celebrer.

"I see," Worick returned curtly. "And that compensation, what is it?"

Theo indicated the area around his bangs with the hand holding the cigarette.

"He has a tuft of hair, here, that's white, remember?"

"Isn't that just a pubescent teen thing? Like, because he thinks it's cool."

"Different parts of his body age differently."

That was hard to grasp.

After letting it sink, Worick confirmed his understanding, "So you're saying only part of his hair became that of an old man?"

"If it was only his hair, it wouldn't matter any. The manner he ages in is first only his right arm gets old, then only his left leg, and so on. If his heart'll age suddenly, his life span will greatly shorten. And if he repeatedly ODs with a body that irregular from the get-go... you follow what I'm getting at?"

Worick puffed out a cloud of smoke and watched it dissipate away.

"Sorry for bringing you another patient that can't get better."

"Damn straight."

Theo ground out his cigarette that still had about half of its length intact, on the ashtray he held in hand and turned his back to Worick.

"Hey. It's a problem for me if you take away the ashtray, y'know?"

"Like I care. Don't get my floor dirty."

Theo proceeded to the back room without looking back.

Worick thought of Nicolas as he gazed at his Pall Mall that had nowhere to go now. Nicolas had run into Johann, there was no doubt about it.

*

About 15 minutes prior, when Nicolas came downstairs, Nina came out of the examination room found in the back of the first floor at the same time. Seeing Nicolas, the girl smiled.

"Ah. You're just in time. The doctor said to give these to you."

She held out two plastic cases she previously cradled to her chest.

Celebrer. Uppers and downers. Twilights' lifeline and the main cause of their death.

Celebrer cost a lot. It was made expensive for a reason different than it being a high-costing drug to produce. Celebrer was the most direct means of making Twilights obey the rules set by Normals. There was an absolute need to make Twilights view Celebrer as "the life credit bestowed upon them by Normals out of goodness of their hearts", so if Celebrer was easy to buy, that equilibrium would crumble.

For that reason, generally, only rich people or prominent mafia families involved in managing and controlling said Celebrer as their bread and butter could afford to keep Twilights. Worick was neither that rich nor that powerful, so he had to rely on Theo selling him illegally the stuff the doctor got through his own routes.

'Are you done helping the doc?'

Nina understood perfectly what Nicolas' hands signed.

"Yes. At the moment, Dario-san is the only hospitalized patient, and his condition is stable. And the doctor is in the back, trying to outstare some other patients' charts."

Nicolas nodded his acknowledgement. Then, noticing the girl's gaze shift from his face to somewhere a little to the side, he remembered about the violets.

'From Worick.' With that, Nicolas presented the girl the flowers.

"Eh? For me?"

'Supposed to be a get-well gift to the mofo sleeping upstairs. But flowers for a dude is even more pointless than pearls before swine, so take them.'

"No, I could not possibly. But the sickroom decorated with flowers will make me happy, too. So thank you."

Nina reached out with both hands, and Nicolas lifted the flowers higher in the air. By reflex, Nina jumped for them, but the flowers were held just out of her reach. When she landed, Nicolas lowered them, and when she jumped, he held them up again, rinsing and repeating a few times until Nina groaned in

frustration.

It wasn't like Nicolas had a dislike for Nina or particularly wanted to harass her. It was just that her troubled expression was fun to watch for some reason, so he teased like that for a bit. Before she had the chance to get peevish for real, he mouthed, 'I'm bored', voicelessly with only his lips, and thrust the violets into her chest.

Nina smiled happily, cradling the flowers gently.

"Thank you," she said.

Nicolas wasn't one to pay much mind to the subtle workings of others' hearts, but he had grasped the real meaning of Nina's words, as well as the reason why she lowered her head immediately after, as if realizing her verbal slip.

If she wanted to give thanks for the flowers, she would have thanked Worick. But her thanks wasn't about that, what she was grateful for was her relationship with Nicolas, probably. To Nicolas, the time spent with her was not unpleasant or anything, but calling it a kind of a compulsory job would not be too off the mark.

Pretending he hadn't realized anything about her true feelings, Nicolas lightly flicked her forehead with his middle finger.

'If you wanna thank someone, thank Worick.'

"Okay. Ah, but it would probably be weird for me to thank him for the flowers meant for Dario-san."

She giggled.

It was like he was playing make believe human. Him, a Twilight — him, who carried another set of tags deep inside him on instinct. That said, the fact made him feel neither good nor bad or sad. Neither did he ever wish to be a Normal, for that matter. It was probably the same as a child's play of imitating how a dog barked or a cat meowed. A mere game that had no meaning beyond killing time.

"Nice smell. I'll go fetch a vase for them," Nina smiled, and the same instance the front door opened. Nicolas glared in that direction.

“Nicolas-san.”

On the doorstep stood someone familiar. The young man wearing a quilted down coat clearly too big for his lanky physique.

“Thank you for saving me the other night.”

Johann bowed nervously. His straight bangs with a white lock rocked with the motion.

‘I wasn’t the one to save you.’

Johann knitted his brows and scratched his cheek sheepishly.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand sign language.”

“Hmph,” Nicolas snorted. It wasn’t like he had any desire to talk with this young man anyway. The youth held a paper bag in his right hand — probably bought something for Dario. Nicolas pointed to the ceiling, imbuing the gesture with the “get going already” meaning.

“Ah, right, thank you.”

Johann bowed again and was about to pass by Nicolas... but suddenly stopped in his tracks.

Nicolas tensed slightly, one eye narrowing. Johann, too, turned his head to him, narrowing his eyes to slits and staring at Nicolas.

“Nina-san, I am sorry to trouble you, but could you please take this to Dario for me? There are 2 bottles of orange juice in here, so please give one to Worick-san.”

Nicolas could tell something was off — it was not a conclusion of the mind, rather he felt it with his skin.

There was the abnormal politeness with which Johann spoke to Nina even though she was just a child and it wasn’t necessary. How familiarly he referred to Dario in contrast. And how he didn’t doubt that Worick was upstairs even though he seemingly had no means of knowing that for sure. Probably all of that combined.

Notwithstanding, Nicolas still didn’t find himself particularly interested in the young man. Whereas he could tell that Johann was very interested in him for

some reason.

"Eh? Ah, alright."

Nina accepted the bag, balancing it with the vase in her hands with some difficulty. Nicolas was about to help her carry the burden, but before he could make a move, Johann said, "Excuse me, Nicolas-san, would you mind sparing me a little of your time?"

Nicolas cocked his head to the side in puzzlement. Asking why with voiced words was bothersome.

"Please. There is something I would like to ask you. So let us step outside for a bit."

In the sharp gaze of Johann's eyes visible from beneath his long bangs, there was something akin to a killing intent. Except it wasn't really that. If it was a real killing intent, Nicolas would know the same instance.

For a very short while, Nicolas considered the issue of Worick's safety. Technically, he was told to protect him, supposedly. In which case, leaving wasn't advisable.

"I will make it quick. Please, to the street in front of the clinic."

Johann turned and started walking.

Nicolas sighed. And then followed Johann.

As long as he didn't get too far away from the clinic, he wouldn't miss any changes that might occur inside, he judged. After all, Nicolas had extremely good eyes. He would notice it if a window got cracked by a bullet.

Out of curiosity that rared its head, Nicolas wondered what would happen if he just ignored Johann who was advancing with steps grand and confident like never before, but what intrigued him the most was the meaning behind the young man's strange look.

Johann stopped in his tracks once they exited Theo's clinic, but Nicolas didn't. The reason was that he remembered that there was a chicken street stall about 20 yards away from the clinic. One kebab sandwich for lunch was not enough.

So now it was Nicolas leading the way with Johann in tow to buy a spicy

grilled chicken leg.

‘It ain’t half-bad,’ he recommended it to Johann, too, just in case. Johann seemed to more or less get what he signed, but he shook his head, declining the suggestion.

Nicolas was devouring his chicken with big bites on the way back to Theo’s clinic. Peeling off the skin with a slurp, he sucked it into his mouth. The taste was on the blank side, but spices and burnt oil smell were tasty on their own.

Noticing that Johann had finally felt like talking, Nicolas focused on reading his lips.

“—away from the stall and I am grateful for that. It was much too smoky there that I could not even speak.”

Nicolas didn’t reply to that. The reason why he moved away from the stall was because the next customer in the line frowned in resentment upon noticing the tags on Nicolas’ chest, and Nicolas simply didn’t want to cause trouble to the stall-keeper by overstaying his welcome, but trying to explain all of that to Johann, who didn’t understand sign language, was too much trouble.

About 5 yards away from the clinic, Nicolas stopped, and Johann got to the point.

“I came to this city to find my little sister.”

Nicolas propped the back of one leg against the fence and leaned his weight on it. Biting into the chicken leg close to his own fingers that held it, he urged the youth with his chin to go on.

“It is this girl. Do you know her?”

Johann produced a photo of a boy and a girl. The boy was Johann, but Nicolas didn’t know the girl. Must be that little sister of his. The girl was about 12–13 and wore a silver necklace shaped like an angel’s wing.

Nicolas didn’t remember ever seeing it though, so he shook his head.

“That’s not true,” Johann said in a cutting tone. “I can smell my sister’s scent on you.”

At that, Nicolas sniffed his own arm. It smelled only of chicken to him.

Johann's eyes were completely serious.

"You must know her. I have never been wrong about smells. That was how I found Dario and Worick-san yesterday."

Even if so, what Nicolas didn't know he didn't know.

"To be honest, this clinic, too, smells of my sister just a little, but the reek of the chemicals is too strong, so I cannot say for sure. Does anything come to mind?"

Nicolas drew a complete blank.

Speaking of girls in Theo's clinic, only Nina came to mind. Besides her, there were only outlaws spreading the alcohol stench.

So Nicolas waved a hand, letting the other know that it didn't ring a bell for him.

"I do not like lies."

But it wasn't a lie. He really didn't know that girl.

Nicolas let out a weary sigh. The chicken leg had mostly become only the bone now. His belly, in contrast, felt sufficiently full. So he launched the remaining bone into the nearest garbage bin. Come to think of it, they had found this young man at a garbage dump site, too, Nicolas idly recalled as he wiped his stained fingertips on the fence. But remembering that served no purpose.

He gazed at Johann sideways. The youth was talking too fast, and it was hard to read it.

'Is that all you wanted from me?'

At Nicolas' gesture, Johann cocked his head to the side quizzically.

Nicolas' words didn't reach him. Not that Nicolas intended to get through to him to begin with.

He had humored the guy for long enough already. Time to go back to the clinic, he decided and moved his leg off the fence it was rested against. When he turned his back to Johann, he felt a voice come from behind him.

"Wait!" the youth had probably screamed. Unfortunately, Nicolas didn't see his mouth to know for sure.

The young man thrust a hand beneath his down coat clearly too big for him. A gun? Or maybe a knife. He was fingering something intended to deal damage to the enemy confronted head-on, in any case. That much could be read in the youth's pupils.

The thirst for blood. Except it was too dull. Yawn-inducing, even.

'When you work up the resolve to take that out, come again and we'll play.'

Communicating this without voicing, Nicolas started walking towards the clinic. As expected, his urge to kill did not get more tangible just from Johann glaring daggers at him.

*

In the end, Worick dealt with his cigarette butt by running after Theo to dispose of it.

Just when he pushed the door leading from the back room back to the examination room open, the door on the other end of the room opened as well, and Nicolas showed his face.

Smiling a light smile, Worick waved a hand at him.

"Welcome back, Nic-chan. Did you get in a fight with Johann-chan?"
'We didn't come to blows.'

"I see. That's a cryptic answer though."

Before Worick closed the door, he stuck only his head in the adjourning room to say, "Well then, see you, doc. But I'll be back."

"Don't be. Your wounds will heal on their own without my help."
"Not for that. I forgot to bring something."

A few hand waves after, he closed the door.

"I'll go retrieve it now, so come with me," he then requested of Nicolas.

With Nicolas coming to his side, he studied his face and suddenly stared in wonder.

"You went to grab a bite, didn't you?"

Now that he thought about it, he left collecting the pay from Granny Joel for fulfilling her request to Nicolas. Due to him drinking the night away with Dario that evening, his memories were vague, but he felt he had yet to see his share of the money.

Nicolas wiped his lips of pepper stuck to them.

'It's only due reward. I was the one to do all the work for that request anyway.'

"You just went and arbitrary pocketed the money. And I got stuck with babysitting."

'Didn't you crave to get close to him? Bed-sharing's your forte, wasn't it.'

"My manual labor costs more than yours, Nic-chan, and I need to be properly paid for it. Was it yummy? Where did you buy that chicken? I want a bite of it too."

When they exited Theo's clinic, Nicolas took a careful look around the street.

"What, did the stall poof out of existence or what?"

There was no sign of a possible attack. At least Worick didn't feel anything of the sort.

'Johann's gone.'

"Oh."

Worick took in their surroundings and noticed something. One of the windows on the second floor was open.

"Up there. Maybe he entered through the window."

'Window?'

"You do it too when you're in a hurry."

Seeing Nicolas' puzzled expression made Worick realize that for some reason he had irrationally expected Nicolas to notice a certain fact about Johann somehow.

"Apparently, that boy, too, has tags hanging around his neck, you see. Although they're hidden by his huge down coat."

‘Ohh.’

Nicolas flashed a slasher smile. That of a hungry predator.

Worick’s lips twisted into a strained smile.

“Owie, Nic, such a scary face. What on earth has happened?”

‘I should’ve made him take out whatever it was he was hiding, by force if necessary.’

“So you did get in a fight with him, huh. I was worried, you know?”

‘We were only a mere step away from fighting.’

“Oh really.”

‘So frustratingly close.’

“Is it too much to ask of you to try and open your eyes to the concept of pacifism, if just a little?”

‘Did you know that peace and war hold the same meaning for all the species except for humans?’

You guys are humans too, Worick was about to say but held his tongue. For Worick, too, was prepared to unsheathe the proverbial sword against Johann — tonight or tomorrow. In the not so distant future, in any case.

If Johann had turned his blade against them first, it would have made this a little simpler, perhaps. Or if Worick just hadn’t bothered with him on that first night to begin with. But that wasn’t how it went.

It was strange, Worick thought. Why did Johann let himself be beaten up without resisting on that night? If he fought back, it went without saying that a gang of 3 puny thugs wouldn’t have stood half a chance. Did he try to uphold the three laws? No, couldn’t be. There had to be something else, some other—

When he arrived at the word ‘reason’, he couldn’t help a laugh.

No, he couldn’t let himself be bothered with details. Not this once.

Johann was a Twilight. And also, in all likelihood, the one behind the mafia killings. But the person Worick’s mind was preoccupied with even more than Johann was Dario.

If so, there was no need for reason or logic with him. Not with someone who didn’t give a damn about guns pointed at him, who ran over two people with

his beloved car even after getting shot in the leg, who cried over a kids' fairy-tale. With someone who was the big fool of a man that way.

Worick looked up at the sky. A cloud had arrived and the dusk of the evening colored it dull gold. The humidity levels were on the rise, Worick thought, pressing a hand to his forever lost left eye.

Chapter 4

The Benriya walked deserted back streets, on the way to their office.

Worick didn't really have much to talk about with Nicolas as they walked. Instead, he used the time to recall a few things. The Lombardi family's documents he looked through at the police station. The story he heard from Dario. The photo the short man dropped of Johann and a girl. And finally, the request a certain woman placed with them...

Just as the two turned the corner of a narrow back alley, Nicolas, eyes sharp and alert, sniffed the air. Worick's hand reached for his left side, while Nicolas' thrust into the pocket of his jacket, taking out Celebrier, fingers ready to twist off the cap. But suddenly, something hit the case.

Knocked out of Nicolas' hands, the case got sliced in two, spinning in midair before hitting the ground, its contents scattering. With a soft whoosh, not unlike a small bird's whistling, a throwing knife hit the wall and tumbled to the ground.

Yet another someone who bought into the false accusations of the Benriya being the mafia slayers? Or...

In any case, they were up against a Twilight, the attacker acting the moment Nicolas tried to take Celebrier proved it beyond doubt.

The next thing to be launched at them was bullets. 4 shots, each fired at an angle slightly different from the previous one. The attacker was somewhere high — probably moving on the roofs, as they tried to snipe Nicolas, targeting him with precision. With a flick of his wrist, katana gripped securely in his hand, Nicolas repelled the bullets. The metallic ching echoed in the narrow alley. Worick couldn't so much as begin to grasp who their attacker was, but he surmised their location from the shifts of Nicolas' line of sight and searched for a position where he wouldn't be in his partner's way.

"How's it looking? Think you can handle it?"

'Shut up.' The right corner of Nicolas' mouth lifted up high in a smirk. 'I'm

having fun. Don't get in my way.'

Upon a closer, Nicolas' cargo pants sported a tear, from which blood oozed. One of the bullets must have grazed his left calf.

—No good.

Inside, Worick got covered with cold sweat at the realization. The wound itself didn't look deep, but the fact that his partner didn't dodge the bullet that inflicted it could prove very much fatal. If Nicolas was alone, he wouldn't have gotten wounded at all. He would have sidestepped the bullet before it could deal any damage to him. The reason why he chose to knock the bullets by force instead of dodging was because of Worick behind him who he had to protect.

—If the attacker started targeting him, the situation would take a sharp turn for the worse, Worick knew.

Nicolas couldn't move away from the spot and leave Worick vulnerable to attacks. The Japanese katana, his pride and joy, couldn't reach the enemy. Forced on the defensive with no means to retaliate, there would eventually come a time when he would slip up. And as far as Worick could tell, the rules of this battle didn't allow for timeouts.

The enemy would continue their long range sniping, Worick predicted, probably switching their target to Worick himself. There was no reason why the handymen's opponent would want to break this stalemate and lose the advantage it provided. Only, Worick soon was proven wrong.

2 more bullets and one more throwing knife sailed through the air. Both weapons only targeted Nicolas. The next object unleashed on the dark-haired Benriya was the attacker themselves.

Kicking the wall, their form was closing in on Nicolas at high speed. From a close distance, the person launched a wire with a weight attached to its end. It sliced through the air with a high pitched shrill. Nicolas wound the wire on his sword and pulled. Feeling the pull, the enemy kicked the ground and leaped, releasing the wire midair. The next scene Worick's eyes registered was the two engaged in a fierce fight. Nicolas, of course, was using his katana, while his opponent was armed with a big slightly bent combat knife. Worick couldn't tell when the guy had even unsheathed it.

—But it looked like Worick wasn't being targeted though?

Was it because the enemy tried to uphold the three laws, or maybe because they were a fighting-obsessed maniac like many Twilights were? Whatever was the case, in a fight pitting raw power against raw power, not many could win against Nicolas. And currently, his partner easily sent his opponent's knife flying.

—No, wrong.

Nicolas' adversary apparently let go of the knife on purpose. The moment Worick realized that, his ears registered the bang of a gunshot.

—Damn, his eyes were unable to keep up.

In any case, the enemy fired at Nicolas pretty much point-blank. Nicolas, on whatever crazy reflexes he possessed, dodged the bullet. His body off balance, he used the momentum to deliver a power-packed bodily blow, following it with a throw of his fist cutting through the air. His opponent leaped away from him, putting about 3 yards between them, picked up the fallen knife off the ground and slowly straightened themselves up.

Only then Worick was finally able to take a good look at the attacker's face.

It was Johann.

His face was expressionless, eyes not seeing anything, not even Nicolas. He kept them closed, like he was sleeping or something. Nicolas plucked off the wire still wound around his katana and flung it away.

Before he had a chance to swoop down on Johann, Worick took a step forward. Nicolas grabbed him by the shoulder, and Worick, turning to him, whispered, "Sorry to spoil your fun, but it's still my turn."
"You'll die if you fight him."
"I wonder about that. I'm pretty tough, y'know?" Worick turned back to Johann. "Besides, remember? We're the most trustworthy handymen in town. Gotta be most earnest about requests placed with us."

His back was to Nicolas though, so there was no way the other Benriya saw the last words being uttered. The shorter man, however, didn't make another attempt to stop Worick.

Worick started walking towards Johann. The young man's eyelids finally lifted then, and surprise showed on his features. And yet, Worick didn't stop his advance. Closer, closer, close enough for the pointed tip of the knife to almost pierce into his body if he leaned forward a little. But Johann withdrew the knife before it could happen.

"What's wrong, Johann-chan, sweetie? Didn't you come to kill us?"

For a while, everything went silent. Worick patiently waited for Johann to open his mouth and talk.

Finally, Johann spoke up in a taut voice, "I have no permission on you yet." "Do you really need your big brother's permission every single time you wanna fight?"

"That's the kind of beings Twilights are, and you, of all people, should know it very well."

"But you two are not really like that."

If Johann was behind the mafia killings, it meant he had ignored the 3 rules and was actively destroying Ergastulum's balance.

"Did you let those thugs do a number on you that night because you didn't have permission?"

"Dario told me not to be violent except when necessary."

"Oh. I didn't think he could be that rational."

"He probably gave that order purely on a whim. But he has a nose that tells the right way instinctively."

"I'm not sure about that. Good for you if you're not misunderstanding."

Worick recalled it again: the Lombardi family's papers, and the photo of Johann and a girl.

Flashing his habitual business smile, he inquired, "Is it Sophia-chan you're looking for?"

His neck no longer hurt any, but he knew there still were faint traces of twin scars left on it.

Sophia. He came across that name in the Lombardi family's documents, too. But not on the list of their members. It was in the catalog of their merchandise,

positioned as ‘dynamite’, along with drags and prostitutes.

Johann sneered. The size of his eyes changed, one becoming bigger than the other, the orbs themselves warping.

“I see. So it was you.”

“I’m more popular than Nic, yes.”

“Not that.” Johann shook his head very slowly. “You smell too strong.”

“Now that’s mean. Can’t exactly say I’m a clean freak, though.”

“I’m talking about perfume. You have so many on you that I couldn’t tell my sister’s scent among them.”

It had been more than a month since the time Sophia stayed with them. And Johann could still detect her scent, huh? Talk about crazy.

Worick cocked his head.

“We won’t run or hide. Tonight, we’ll come to Dario. So how about you bow out for now?”

“Sorry, but I cannot do that.”

“Then what are you gonna do, boy? Disregard your big bro’s orders and skewer my chest with your knife, here and now?”

Johann was silent. The troubled face he wore was so very childish. His usual timid mannerisms were not an act, apparently.

“Stand down, boy. It’s adult time from here on out. But don’t worry, our Nic looks all fired up, too, so you’ll have yourselves your playtime soon enough.”

Johann glared at Worick for a while. Then he turned on his heels and started walking away. Worick, too, turned away from him.

Nicolas pointed down with his finger. ‘Let me fight him here.’

“Don’t be in such a hurry. We can’t cut corners when fulfilling a client’s request.”

‘What request are you even talking about?’

“Huh? I didn’t tell you?”

Sophia’s request.

—Hide me for the next 3 years.

She was perfectly aware of her enclosing death. And she didn't hope for a miracle to occur that would somehow let her live longer. That's why it was really puzzling why she would place a request like that.

But now Worick finally understood the reason.

He had accepted her request, for better or for worse. And now that he had learned the meaning behind it, he had no choice but to fulfill it.

It took some effort to make Nicolas see the whole picture of the situation. It was something he wouldn't be interested much in even under the best of circumstances, and this time his mood was particularly foul due to having had to accept a fight postponement, so he looked vehement as he argued, venting his anger.

'In the first place it makes zero sense. That Sophia woman was at least 10 years older than that brat! No way she was his little sister.'

"As I was saying for some time now, Johann-chan's compensation is a little odd. Different parts of his body age differently. If you peek underneath that down coat of his, you might find that his right arm is that of an old man, while his left arm is that of a baby."

'You wanna say he looks much younger than his actual age?'

"If I had to guess, it's probably the opposite? Sophia-chan probably had the same compensation as him. That's why her face looked much older than her actual age."

Come to think of it, she took pains not to show much skin. Worick remembered her wish to be cremated in her clothes. He thought her to be a woman not much different from himself in age, but now he was sure she was more than 10 years younger than him.

That kind of compensation must have been especially hard on a girl. If she was still around, he would have tried to comfort her. But nothing could have been done about it anymore.

'Alright, then why the brat goes around asking about her with a photo like that? Is he an idiot or what?'

"You saw that photo, too, Nic-chan? That's where the problem lies, ain't it."

Even as he replied vaguely, Worick could already venture an educated guess

as to the reason.

Johann's inquiry didn't account for that peculiar compensation. In which case, it meant that Sophia hid her compensation from him.

Worick remembered what Theo said about her condition.

— *You can't really tell from her appearance but her organs are all pretty much decayed.*

At the time, Worick assumed it was due to the effects of overdosing on Celebrier. But now that he thought about it, perhaps it spoke of her compensation. Sophia aged starting from the inside. In which case, it wasn't too much of a stretch to assume that she managed to successfully hide her compensation from Johann.

Nicolas, probably getting fed up with this conversation for real, signed with rough movements.

'So, in the end, are they the mafia slayers or aren't they?'

"It's 99% certain that they are. They started with the Lombardi family and continued with the families that the Lombardis had dealings with. All for the sake of taking back Sophia-chan."

'In short, bump 'em off, and we're done with this shit.'

"Mn. I guess understanding that much should be enough for you, Nic-chan," nodding, Worick then glanced at Nicolas' left leg.

Nicolas' calf, grazed by a bullet earlier, was still bleeding. It looked like the wound was deeper than it had seemed at first.

"Is that OK though?"

'I'm not a wimp like you.'

"Ask Nina-chan to bandage that later."

Nicolas didn't reply, just scratched his head.

Chatting about nothing, they made it back to their office. Just as they opened the door, the phone began to ring.

The sun had almost set, so the ringing phone was a hassle, in Worick's honest opinion, but he picked up the receiver anyway. On the other end of the line,

there was an old member of the Monroe family, Myles. He was almost as striking as Monroe himself, but gentler and close with the Benriya. Among those who could have called them, he was on the easy to deal with side. That said, it was still a hassle given the fact that he went out of his way to make the call himself.

“How unusual of you to contact us in person, Myles-nii.”

“Boss’ orders. Says he’s so worried about you rascals that he can’t sleep at night.”

Yeah, right, Worick gave a sarcastic smile inside.

“How’s the progress?”

“We’ve got suspects,” Worick reported shortly, and Myles humph-ed on the other end.

“Nothing less from you, Benriya.”

“But of course. Our earnest attitude is our selling point, after all.”

“We can trust you to take care of them then?”

“Sure,” Worick replied.

Mafia was one of the organizations — few in number even worldwide — that retaliated proportionally based on reason and calculation. If someone did wrong by you, do the same to them. Stay invincible in the world of violence. It would not be an exaggeration to say that to mafia, the title of the overdog was the fundamental tool of their trade. That’s why every mafia family sought to mete out retribution for their wronged members.

The mafia slayers did wrong by too many mafia families. Too many were after their heads now. The issue of who would have the honor to deliver said retribution could become the bone of contention soon, too. Of course, considering the power dynamics within Ergastulum, the Monroe family was one candidate for the retributor role no one would complain about, but the city’s small-time thugs like Worick and Nicolas inadvertently killing the culprits was an even better and more peaceful solution. That was probably the likely reason why Daniel Monroe didn’t stipulate that the culprits should be captured alive.

“I’m planning to make arrangement for a gift box with the mafia slayers packed inside as early as tomorrow. Ah, right, there’s something I wanted to

ask. Does Monroe-san like violets?"

"Hm?"

"Flowers. I happened to come across a shop that sells some beautiful ones. Can't have the present smell of blood too much."

Myles was silent for a few seconds. Probably tried to gauge Worick's intention behind the question. But in the end, he didn't pry into it any further, replying mildly, "Do as you want. Give me a call once you're finished tomorrow."

"And what will happen if I'm behind the schedule?" Worick knew the answer, just wanted to confirm it.

"All kinds of families built up a lot of pent-up anger. If it was to explode, the number of dead bodies will increase by an order of magnitude, and controlling who would end up among the corpses may be impossible." So don't fall behind the schedule, Myles implied gently and hung up.

"It's a cruel world we live in," Worick murmured and ended the call as well.

Although Worick had no such intention in the first place, now it was more clear than ever that wrapping up this business with just cutting off a few fingers was impossible.

Most things had the upside and downside to them. The life where you received a call from a member of a mafia organization first thing after coming home made Worick sigh, but at the same time, it reminded him of his place. In essence, it was the same as his ability of not forgetting anything. So first, the upside of it. He remembered all things he had done and all places he had been to. Now, the downside. For that exact reason, he couldn't bring himself to clean up the room.

Worick went downstairs and took a necklace he had hung there for the time being on a kitchen hook next to spatulas. The necklace was silver and in the shape of an angel's wing.

'Is that what you forgot and went back to fetch?' Nicolas, leaning against the wall, twisted his lips in annoyance.

"It's the pay for the request. Made in advance."

'It's a cheap thing no matter how you look at it.'

Worick hung the necklace on his index finger and span it around it.

"True, maybe I gave her a bit too big of a discount. She wasn't even my type. Oh well, what's done is done, I've already accepted her request."

'That woman is already dead.'

"Uh-huh. The request of a dead woman. The sort of request that you have to fulfill even if it kills you."

'I don't really get it though. What kind of request did she even make, pray tell?'

Worick didn't grace that question with an answer as he put on the necklace around his neck.

"Oh right. There was something about her that I did like. You see, I prefer women who wear perfect make-up even if they know they're about to die. Keeping up the lovely appearances till the bitter end is what makes wearing makeup meaningful."

'Answer me. What should I do?'

"Easy." Looking into his partner's black eyes, Worick grinned. "Like you said yourself, Nic. They're the mafia slayers, so bump them off and we're done with this."

Nicolas grinned back at him. It was a wild, maniacal expression.

'Yeah, easy to understand is the best kind.'

The Benriya would fulfill the dead girl's request. As well as the semi-forced request of the mafia boss, of course. This once, the two were not mutually exclusive. Could it be considered their luck?

"We're under no obligation to settle it prettily. Simply faithfully fulfilling what was requested of us should be enough. In just moderation. Like always, partner."

Before Worick was finished with his speech, Nicolas had already started walking. Worick followed him. Once they left the office, he raised his hand to the necklace a little too tight for him to touch it just once.

*

When Johann returned to the sickroom, Dario slept, snoring in his sleep.

Johann didn't really understand the man, even now. It had been a whole year already since they had met, but Johann still couldn't even take a guess about

what went through the short man's head.

And at times, he even looked like a complete and utter fool to Johann. Johann recognized that he himself lacked the sense of social etiquette, but he felt that compared to Dario, he was much better off.

On the other hand, there also existed the undeniable feeling of respect for Dario in him.

At the very least, they were still alive. Johann was being kept alive by Dario. And it felt much better than the coarse environment he was forced to live in before coming into Dario's possession. Only Dario could accomplish something like that. Only the man, who wasn't even smart and a really weak fighter, but possessed an extraordinary sense of smell.

Johann's own nose was good. Twilights were superior to Normals in all things bodily, but even among Twilights Johann's sense of smell was outstanding.

The one to pick up the really important smells, however, was Dario. The two, guided by his often inflamed nose which was also runny when pollen danced in the air, actually survived and even made it this far.

—He had nothing anymore, Johann thought. He also knew that his body would not last long, either.

No, there was still one thing left: the meager freedom Dario had given him.

*

Johann didn't know his father. He hadn't even heard his name.

It was not much better with his mother as all he remembered was the sensation of being petted by a thin hard dry hand. He believed it was his mother's hand. But his little sister, Sophia, didn't even know that. Apparently, their mother had died when Johann was 3 and Sophia was only a 6 month old infant. He didn't hear anything about the reason for her death.

When Johann became old enough to understand what was going on around him, he and his sister had already been kept by a mafia organization.

He never considered it something odd. Neither did he think of his life as frustrating or sad. In his understanding, he simply was that kind of creature.

His masters changed a few times.

The first mafia family treated Twilights like livestock, feeding them tasteless swill and dishing out beatings depending on the members' mood. That family got into a fight with another family, lost and dissolved as a result, with the winning family claiming Johann and Sophia as spoils of war. Johann believed he was about 8 at the time.

The siblings' second owners were of a more calm kind. They treated Twilights as merchandise and had the minimal management system in place. Johann learned to train and read under them. His first kill, too, was for a job entrusted to him by that family. No one made an attempt to strike up a conversation with Johann or Sophia, but as long as you had fulfilled your quota, food and a place to sleep was guaranteed. About 4 years later Johann and his sister were sold off to another family. Apparently, they sold for good money, so the woman that was in charge of taking care of them, even praised them for one last time at the end. Johann didn't know the woman's name.

In any case, Johann was 12 and Sophia was 9 when they met a certain man.

He was called Gummy, but obviously, that wasn't his real name. Johann figured out from the conversations he happened to overhear that other members gave him that nickname for his long greasy hair. The siblings never learned his real name until the end.

Gummy was young and held the position of a Capo Regime for a North Gate mafia organization. It looked like the organization wasn't exactly small, so he probably was a decent go-getter. He was controlling and selfish. And he also knew that in order to get his way, what was necessary was effective utilization of violence. That's why he bought Johann and his sister. As tools of violence for his beloved self.

Johann knew for sure from the first time he had met him in person that the man had no slightest interest in the two of them. Gummy didn't even bother to take a look at Johann's face, instead he grabbed the tags hanging from Johann's neck and commented, "So-so."

He let go of the tags and then punched Johann in the face without warning. It wasn't really painful and it wasn't like Johann was taken aback at the

treatment. Observing Johann who didn't budge, Gummy roared with laughter.

"For someone so misshapen, he got guts! Maybe he'll be of some use, after all. Hey," Gummy wasn't addressing Johann. He was talking strictly to his henchmen the entire time. "I ain't gonna be satisfied with just these lows. I'm gonna get me an A-rank, mark my words. Keeping these is just a stopgap. For the time being, I'm gonna use 'em and abuse 'em."

Twilights were assigned a ranking category composed of a letter and a digit. At the time, Johann's rank was C/2, while Sophia's was D/1. A-ranks were rare, and obtaining them was more difficult than a top tier Mercedes model.

"Don't ya get 'em dirty, hear me? They don't look like much, but they're still my tools."

And so, the siblings started living under Gummy's rule.

There was a reason why Gummy described Johann as 'misshapen'.

At 12, Johann's right arm was much bigger than his left. Since he was used to double wielding weapons, neither of his hands were soft, but his left arm still preserved youth appropriate for his age. In contrast, his right was rugged, with wrinkles and knots and joints big and jutting out, as if it was an arm of an adult man.

With his childish left and his grown-up right hands, Johann killed many people, like he was ordered to. Speaking of kill count, Sophia's wasn't far behind either. Gummy used the siblings to kill his own traitors, his trade rivals and even loud stray dogs. Forced to make up for their still immature bodies with overdosing on Celebrer, the two never failed to accomplish the task given to them at the expense of their rapidly shortening life spans. Gummy was a vulgar man, but not without craftiness. He had a firm grasp on the limits of the two's abilities and never made the blunder of choosing a target stronger than the siblings could handle.

Before long, Johann started experiencing a pleasure of sorts when overdosing on Celebrer.

It was pleasant to forget who he was and just lose himself to violence his overflowing with power body caused. He didn't have to think of anything when

he was killing. Blood spilling out of people as they were dying stunk to high heaven and turned his stomach, but as his flesh groaned in pain, for some reason Johann's mood would get brighter. At least, for as long as Johann kept killing, immersed in the life of daily carnage and continuous self-torture, he didn't have to worry about anything.

Johann was profoundly unhappy. But he didn't realize it. The fact that since the day he was born, he had never once experienced even a moment of happiness was the last line of defense that had just barely protected his heart.

One would not seek what one did not know. And if one did not seek anything, it was easy to just exist.

On a certain day, about two years after Gummy bought the two, Johann changed just a little.

At the time, Johann was mastering various weapons, including knifes and guns. It was Gummy's order so he could unleash violence even more overwhelming, and with his different-sized arms, different-sized knifes felt comfortable in his hands, so while he was searching for the most suitable weapons, he came to master quite a few kinds of them. Johann didn't grow much, partly due to his peculiar compensation, so he centered his fighting style around his speed and mobility. He also managed to integrate use of many big weapons into his style minutely changing and adjusting

as the need demanded.

Since he was also tasked with security, Johann lived on the premises, in a plain cabin built in a nook of Gummy's estate. On that day, when he finished his training session in the yard and was on his way to the cabin, he heard a soft whimper. It came from behind the cabin.

When he came around, he saw a crouching Sophia holding out pieces of bread given to them for lunch. In front of her, there was an old mud-covered dog. Johann didn't know anything about dog breads, but this one was probably a mongrel. It didn't look like it could cost good money.

Sophia's shoulders jumped in surprise when she heard the footsteps, and she whipped her head to look at the intruder. When she saw it was Johann, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"What's with that dog?" Johann asked.

"It was injured."

Johann's eyes studied the dog. Or rather, his nose did.

Indeed, the left paw of that old dog was injured, he could feel the smell of blood coming from there. But that wound almost healed.

Sophia smiled.

"It will be able to run again soon, I think."

"Since when?"

"Eh?"

"Since when have you been taking care of this dog?"

"About a week, I think."

Animals smelled pretty strong. Johann was taken aback at the fact that he had evidently failed to notice the dog's presence until now. But he easily realized the reason for that.

—He simply did not care. About the dog or about his sister. He just stayed apathetic the whole time.

For some reason, Johann suddenly felt incredibly confused, fingering the knife he trained with. For a while, he stared at his sister fixedly.

—What on earth was going on with him?

His head was dizzy.

—How did this little girl find something like taking care of a dog even possible?

He had thought Sophia was the same as him. That she just killed and in between killings, just existed, having accepted such a life. And yet, how she... How could his sister who was born the same as him and was raised the same as him, smile when she shared her bread with a dog? He couldn't understand it.

In those moments, the little girl in front of him suddenly looked precious and irreplaceable in his eyes. A conviction dawned on him that she was different from him.

Coming closer, he patted Sophia's head gently. No one taught him to do that,

the gesture came to him naturally. Or maybe he recalled the touch of his mother's hand he had felt when he was a toddler.

Sophia was surprised just a little, but then her eyes narrowed in a whole-face smile.

"Is something wrong, onii-chan?"

"No..." He couldn't find the right words. "You're such a good girl, Sophia," was all he managed to say with effort.

When the girl under his hand smiled, his chest suddenly felt strange, like someone stroke it with their fingertips. That was the feeling of happiness Johann had experienced for the first time.

—I'm already beyond saving. But let at least this girl stay unbroken, he prayed, wishing he could protect the feelings this girl, who, just like him, had had to kill countless times, still had to pour them onto a stray dog.

A single gunshot Johann had heard later that night was what strengthened his own feelings for his sister more than ever.

A gunshot.

It was not the first time when Johann heard its loud and somehow sorrowful sound echoing throughout the premises of this mansion. Gummy was a man who made enemies as easily as he breathed, after all.

This time, however, Johann had a bad feeling about it. Only one gunshot resounded. They weren't under attack.

In the air there was the smell of gunpowder, of blood and of animals.

And of 2 humans. —Sophia and Gummy.

That was what Johann's senses told as he exited the cabin.

One look at the scene before his eyes was enough to get the gist of what had happened there.

Head stuck out the mansion's window, Gummy was looking at the yard and grinning. And in the yard, Sophia stood, tears welling up in her eyes. In her hand, she was gripping a gun. The old dog lay collapsed on the ground bleeding

with darkish blood.

Noticing Johann, Gummy flashed a vile smirk, saying, "Hey. If you're her big brother, discipline her properly. Teach her not to pick up garbage."

It was nothing new, Johann thought. Gummy would say kill, and they would kill. It was the same as always.

Johann didn't feel anger. Only, he hated seeing Sophia with tears in her eyes. The dog lay, not making a sound. Johann walked towards that source of the disgusting bloody smell.

The dog seemed to be dying. After watching its face wet with blood, Johann crushed its head underfoot. It felt not much different from breaking an egg.

"Eek!" a tiny shriek escaped Sophia's throat. And then, after a long heavy silence, she burst into tears loudly.

Gummy called out to Johann in irritation, "Hey. She's offending to my hearing. Make her stop. And clean up the trash," he ordered, spitting and closing the window.

Johann hugged Sophia close.

"You're not the one who killed it. I did."

His little sister kept crying in his arms.

"You didn't kill it," Johann kept repeating.

No one should hurt this girl. He didn't care about anything else, but he must protect Sophia no matter.

"Come on, stop crying, please."

Next, he would give her something that would not die, he thought then. He would go out on another kill mission soon enough, anyway. And then he would have all the chances he could want to steal money from dead bodies' pockets.

Johann trained himself with dedication and put earnest effort into polishing his ability to unleash violence. Before long, the Twilight rank etched on his tags went from C to B.

If I got stronger, Gummy would use mostly me, he thought. He wanted to

become so strong that his sister would never have to kill again.

As his combat technique improved, Gummy actually started using Johann more frequently. Additionally, Johann often volunteered for jobs himself. Clashes with other Twilights had become a more frequent occurrence, too. Twilights' power levels were often determined with what they were born with. It wasn't like Johann was an outstanding Twilight, but he made up for what he lacked with Celebrier, continuing to turn Gummy's wishes into reality.

Another 7 years passed like that. Johann turned 21, and Sophia 19.

On a certain day, when Johann was keeping to himself in the siblings' cabin, he picked up the voice of Gummy who had just returned. It made him feel anxious.

Gummy was clearly mad. Bottles of alcohol, chairs, table, pet dog, maids, henchmen — he threw and kicked everything and anything that was in the vicinity, roaring out his enraged outbursts.

Gummy's voice was hard on the ears. But Johann had to bear with it, straining his hearing to listen carefully so that he could go immediately if the man called for him. He had to respond within a fixed number of seconds. Unnecessary wounds would be inflicted if he was late. Lately, Gummy had acquired a taste of taking it out on Sophia when he was irritated at Johann. He was a man evil to the core.

Gummy roared like a beast in heat, and his unintelligible rumblings didn't provide much information. But Johann managed to more or less grasp the reason behind his rage. Apparently, Gummy lost at gambling, and lost big.

"Fuck, that stupid prick! A fucker like him pushing his luck!" Gummy spat out vehemently, then called the siblings.

The two lined up in the garden, mindful of keeping their steps silent as to not ire Gummy further with the sound of them. Gummy, seated on the sofa in the living room, spared them a glance through the open window, then launched a lighted cigar at Johann. It went flying in a wrong direction, missing Johann, the fact putting Gummy into an even worse mood.

"Hey, Tag. How long's it been since you came here?"

Unable to gauge the intent behind the question, Johann provided an answer the best he could, "About 9 years, sir."

"I see. You've been doing a surprisingly good job all this time. I bet you're tired, ain't ya? About time you rested."

Johann felt terror of the kind he had never felt before. There was just no way the man would reward him. And actually, contrary to the words, the mobster's voice rang with heated anger. There was something in it that deviated from the usual patterns prefacing Johann getting punched, kicked or ordered to kill someone.

Roughly cutting off the tip of a fresh cigar, Gummy lit it up. Breathing in the smoke slowly, he exhaled it along with an utterance, "Johann. Don't move."

Cold sweat traveled down Johann's brow. He had no idea what Gummy's intention was, but he knew that if he obeyed the man's order, something bad would happen. Except, in spite of that realization, his body stiffened, ceasing all movement, as was ordered. Was it because Twilights were bound by the 3 rules? Or because he would not survive without Celebrer Gummy provided? No, neither of those.

By the time Johann reached the age of reason, he had already been 'kept' no different from an animal. The rules ingrained deep into the marrow of his instincts did not permit him to disobey his master's orders.

Next, Gummy pointed to Sophia with his cigar and ordered, "Hey, Sophia. Kill Johann."

Johann's head refused to make sense of that.

What he remembered then was the old dog. The dog that Sophia shot and Johann crushed the head of. If she shot Johann now, who would be there to crush Johann's skull? Johann didn't want to force his little sister to kill him. Then, should he try and kill himself before she could pull the trigger? He had his throwing knife he trained with on him, strapped to the lining of his jacket. It was a small knife, only a little longer than his own index finger, but it should be sufficient to slit his own throat.

Except, Johann didn't move, and there was only one reason for that: Gummy ordered him not to. Johann, brought up like a perfect pet dog, couldn't disobey

even the most absurd order of his master.

"Hey, do it already," Gummy demanded.

With a hand that shook so much that one could think it was on purpose, Sophia pointed a gun at Johann. Johann could smell her sweat and tears. A long while had elapsed, but she still didn't pull the trigger.

"Why?" she implored. "Why do I have to kill my brother?"

Gummy clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Hurry the fuck up and do it. I'm getting fed up with this."

Sophia disengaged the safety.

She appeared very young for her age, and her eyes were filled with tears. She was also very pale, with her lips having lost all color as well. On her neck, there was the necklace that Johann gave her as a present. He didn't like the tags hanging from her neck, so he chose a wing-themed necklace, in hopes that at least she would be more free. Gummy never noticed though.

For one last time, Johann looked at Gummy.

And for the first time in his life he prayed to God for Gummy to change his mind if this was just a sick game of His. But it was like Gummy on the other side of the window was in an entirely different world, watching the show absentmindedly and puffing on his cigar.

Sophia's index finger tensed. But...

Before a gunshot could resound, from the entranceway, a knock on the door came.

Using that as an excuse, Sophia relaxed her finger. Gummy on the other side of the window reflexively shifted his gaze to the wall beyond which the source of the sound was located, but that was all. With his chin he demanded Sophia to continue. Only for the knocking to come again, and this time, it was loud and accompanied by the sound of something breaking.

Johann glanced at Gummy who shouted, pissed, "Hey, stop the fuckin' noise!"

The noise did not stop though. Gummy probably couldn't hear it, but Johann's sensitive ears picked up a new sound. The sound of footsteps. Of the careless

and absolutely alertless kind.

Johann tried to assess if that sound boded well or not for him and his sister. He doubted that any footsteps resounding in this mansion could actually bring them luck, but on the other hand, it was rather hard to imagine it making the siblings' situation worse than it already was.

In any case, the footsteps headed straight for the living room, and its door opened.

To Johann, everything beyond the window looked like it was happening in a different world. It felt the same as when Gummy was leering at Sophia with a gun clasped in her hand.

The visitor who came through the door was a man of about 30 in a gaudy striped suit.

Johann, at gunpoint of the gun his beloved little sister was forced to point at him, idly thought that the rare color the man chose for his suit made him easy to remember. And also that he resembled a bug. He was so painfully conspicuous against the dull background surrounding him. The man didn't feel real to Johann.

But Johann knew that he saw this uninvited guest before. Sometime ago, he accompanied Gummy to a meeting of the mafia family as a bodyguard, and that was where he saw that gaudy man. Johann didn't know the man's name, but he had to be a Capo Regime, just like Gummy. If memory served, he was—

"Hey. What's a dirty stray want with me?"

Right, Stray.

That's what the man in question was called. A hated mad dog that could not really connect to any organization. It made one legitimately wonder why a man like that was a Capo Regime in the first place, but what Johann found more memorable about him was the pattern of his suit.

The Stray resembling a bug flashed a crooked grin.

"I came to collect my gamble winnings. 'Cause I just might forget about it come tomorrow."

"Don't worry, everything'll be delivered to you by tonight."

"No dice, have no need for a bad smelling corpse. You bet the mad dog that killed a hundred people, right?"

"I'm telling ya, I'll include everything, up to the last finger, so go chew on a bone or something in the meantime, damn mutt. Don't be greedy and pester me for more, now. Or what, want me to send ya lead as a present first?"

From that exchange, Johann finally had the more or less full picture of his situation.

Gummy bet Johann — and lost. That's why he intended to first turn Johann into a corpse and only then hand him over to that Stray.

Sophia, her gun still pointing at Johann, watched the gaudy stripes guy with entreating eyes. Johann shared her sentiments.

—With this, they would be saved.

His sister wouldn't have to kill him.

Johann had received the order to not move from Gummy. But his master was no longer Gummy. If only that Stray person said just one word, something like run, this whole crisis would be settled. Stray probably wouldn't want to lose on the spot the spoils he won at gambling.

What Johann heard next, however, was Gummy's yell, "Whatcha taking your sweet time for?! Shoot already, bitch!" he ordered Sophia.

At that, she aligned her gun properly, but still didn't pull the trigger. She was waiting for Stray's words. Johann's attention, too, was focused almost solely on the man.

The man, though, spared him a glance, raised his brows questioningly and asked simply, "Hey, you over there. You're in a tough spot, ain't ya. So what are you just standing around there for?"

Johann's eyes went wide at that, and he suddenly felt the urge to tell the man that he should know the reason why without asking because it was the most obvious thing in the world. That he was simply obeying the order of the previous master.

"I would like you to give me a new order please," Johann pleaded.

Stray seemed to have lost any interest in Gummy anymore. He crossed to the window, put a foot on the windowsill and jumped out into the yard.

His action shook Johann to the core. He thought the world beyond the window was an entirely different dimension, one that was not supposed to ever come in contact with the world where he and his sister existed. And yet, that man went and crossed here like it was nothing. The gaudy color of his clothes hurt the eyes. He was smelly, dusty and beastly somehow. Truly a smell befitting a stray, Johann thought.

The colorful Stray chuckled.

"Huh. I get it now. You've been spoiled silly when growing up, eh?"

Spoiled silly? Him?

That was clearly too much of a stretch no matter how you looked at it, Johann thought. He didn't know what exactly counted as typical upbringing, but he was certain that never once in his life had he ever been spoiled in anything.

"You've never killed people, have ya?"

"Yes, I have. I have killed a lot of people."

"Now, listen up, boy. It ain't guns or bullets that kill people. People kill people, always. Unlike that Hairdo over there, I ain't no good at lame stupid things, and I've no intention of shouldering your desire to kill for you. I've no interest in a dog kept immobile with its chains."

Johann's breath caught. His next reaction was self-search.

—Did he even have a desire to kill in him? Was there anyone he wanted to kill without being ordered to?

The man opened his arms wide and flashy and, eyes taking on the gleam of insanity, said, "Let's make this fun, Johann. If you wanna kill, kill. If you wanna die, die. I will work you to the bone, but I will guarantee you freedom. I swear," he finished.

Johann wanted to check what Sophia's face looked like, but didn't. For he had already found his desire to kill — not for her, not for anyone — it was only his

own.

Taking out the throwing knife, he launched it. It sailed through the space, unresistingly crossing to the other side of the window and ripping Gummy's throat open with equal ease.

A single awfully smelling breath escaped from the mobster's throat with a hiss. The man who was always so loud, couldn't even make noise in his last moments. And so, Johann had truly killed someone for the first time.

Apparently, the incident with a kept Twilight killing a Capo Regime made a lot of noise in the family.

As a result, Stray — Dario was the man's name — quit the family, taking Johann with him.

The bosses demanded Dario to present them Johann's head, but he didn't obey the order. "I quit because I got bored," Dario would say, but it was a fact that the family unilaterally severed all connections with him, expelling him.

Johann was forced into a rather difficult life because obtaining Celebrier was not easy, but strangely enough, he didn't die. Dario's words and conduct were absurd, but somehow he routinely overcame all kinds of troubles that were thrown at them. He had started calling Johann his kid brother and demanded Johann call him casually, too, without any titles or formalities.

He was always cheerful, and it was beyond Johann's comprehension how he could be.

"Why are you going to such lengths for me?" Johann asked once.

It was completely unheard of for a Capo Regime to willingly lose his position and be exiled by his mafia family for the sake of a Twilight.

"What makes you think I'm doing it for ya?" Dario asked with honest to God surprise. "I simply always choose where it's fun to be."

"What fun is it to be with me?"

"Well, 'cause you're a weird one, ya see."

"Am I? I cannot compete with you, in any case."

Dario only grinned in reply, not explaining his reasons any further.

What weighted heavily on Johann's heart was Sophia. She was still owned by the family.

"So what'd ya wanna do?" Dario asked him.

"I want to take her back," Johann replied.

From there on out, the two's objective became Sophia's rescue.

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After an investigation that had taken a year, the two had learned that the family had already sold Sophia.

The buyer she was sold off to was the Lombardi family — a rather modest-sized mafia family based in Ergastulum.

Following that information, the two came to the city of Ergastulum. They destroyed the Lombardi family, but didn't find Sophia there, so having investigated the Lombardis' clients, they followed that trail and dealt with them one by one.

And presently, Dario was covered in bandages from head to toe, sleeping a patient's bed and snoring loudly. In exchange, they were able to pinpoint Sophia's whereabouts. A duo consisting of a one-eyed man named Worick and a Tag called Nicolas was their clue. All that was left was to kill those two, and it finally would be over.

Johann observed the sleeping Dario who looked like he had no care in the world, as he pondered.

He was told by the doctor that his body would hold out for about 2 more years. He knew he didn't have long even before hearing that, and his only regret was Sophia. If only he could ensure the well-being of that kind, tender-hearted girl, he would die happy and no end would make him more content.

Sophia and Johann both were worked to the bone by Gummy, but if a comparison was to be drawn, Johann was often the more reckless one. Besides, to Johann's knowledge, Sophia didn't have to shoulder any kind of compensation, so she should still have quite a long life ahead of her.

Just thinking about making his little sister happy made Johann's chest feel

warm inside. She would live somewhere where it was calm and peaceful. Somewhere where it didn't stink of blood. And this time, she would be able to keep a dog for real. Pick up a local stray and share fluffy bread with it. Just that was enough for Johann to die with a smile on his face, and even go as far as to say that his crap of a life was nevertheless a happy one.

Before long, Dario stopped snoring and opened his eyes.

"What, more visitors?" he mumbled.

Needless to say, Johann, too, had already sensed the presence of other callers.

"It's Worick-san and Nicolas-san. Can I kill them?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because it was you, Dario, who told me not to be violent in this city. Besides, I already have your permission to kill Nicolas-san, but not Worick-san."

"Huh? Why so much trouble?"

"No idea. Probably because you are very whimsical."

"Oh really. Oh well, this city reeks of misfortune, so maybe I wanted to go about it in a more clever way."

Johann wanted to ask him about why he couldn't remember even his own reasoning, but before he could, the door opened. What came next was the familiar foul smell of all kinds of perfume and beauty products all mixed together,

assaulting Johann's nose and turning his stomach. But this time, he could pick up his sister's smell among them very distinctly.

On the neck of Worick, who set foot into the room, there was a necklace. The necklace that Johann gave his little sister as a present.

Dario rose up on his bed, speaking up, "Yo, my friend. Where's your other half?"

"Nic's downstairs. Sorry to wake you up."

"I don't really like sleeping. Makes you idle away your time. So, here for another get-well visit?"

"I've something to ask you." Worick showed a superficial smile, neither particularly happy nor particularly sad. "Are you the infamous mafia slayers?"

Dario answered back without any hesitation, “Yeah, probably? I don’t know that lame name, but it does ring a bell.” He pointed a finger at Worick’s neck. “Now, tell me something, too. Are you the one who bought the woman named Sophia?”

Worick nodded.

“I made off with her. A fine woman, ain’t gonna give her to anyone.”

“Then we got a problem. I want that woman.”

“Not you but the boy over there wants her, right? Oh well, whatever. I, too, happen to have a problem. I have to get you two’s heads, you see.”

“In that case, great.”

“Great? What is?”

Dario grinned. With an innocent and equally insane grin. Like a beast far removed from the concepts of good and bad.

“We both have something the other wants. With bets in place, all that’s left is to decide what we’re gonna gamble on.”

Worick shrugged in seeming dissatisfaction. “Are those bets of equal value though?”

“What the heck. Are you saying that the heads of two men ain’t worth one woman?”

“Well, duh? To me, I don’t get a desire to drink with dudes, no matter how many of them there are, but if it’s just one fine woman, then I’m all revved up and ready?”

“But you’d drink if it was with a friend, no? One of the heads you seek is mine. Cut me some slack, man.”

“How selfish,” Worick smirked, lips twisting. “Oh well, deal. Do you mind if I choose what we’re gonna bet on?”

“Nah, knock yourself out. But spare me petty tricks, will ya.”

Johann forced his way into the conversation then, speaking up from a spot by Dario’s bedside, “Dario. I will fight. No need to resort to something as uncertain as gambling—”

“Alright, let’s do that then.” Worick pointed a finger at Johann. “My partner and your kid brother will fight it out, and we’ll bet on the winner. Which one d’you

wanna bet on?"

"My kid bro, of course," Dario grinned. "Sure you wanna bet on that taciturn fella though?"

"But of course. Nic won't lose."

"We got ourselves a deal then. I'm betting my and Johann's heads. And you bet Sophia. The winner takes it all. No objection, I trust?"

"None. But you see, we're in a bit of a hurry. Can we get to it right away?"

"That was my intention from the start though?"

"You sure? Don't mind if bland hospital food becomes your last supper?"

"I won't lose. I've never lost at gambling."

"Is that really true?"

"I don't remember small stuff. I think I've never lost, but ask Johann for a confirmation."

Worick turned his head to Johann, wordlessly asking if it was true.

Johann sighed. It was true that Dario was really good at gambling, but it went without saying that he couldn't possibly stay undefeated. Like the person in question said himself, he just didn't remember the times when he had lost.

But tonight would be different.

"Of course it is true," Johann nodded.

The corners of Worick's lips lifted up in a smile as he turned his back to the two.

"I'm sure you two have some last words that need to be said between you. So let's meet on the couch at the garbage dump site where we first met Johann-chan. But don't make us wait too long."

With a wave of his hand, Worick left the sickroom.

Dario hopped off the bed, flung away the hospital gown and tore off the bandages.

"Hey, kid bro, d'you happen to know where's my awesome suit?"

Taking out the suit out of the closet, Johann quietly inquired, "Are you sure?"
"About what?"

"You ended up betting your life for me."

"What makes ya think I did it for ya? I got me such an enticing gamble. The one having the most fun right now is me, y'know."

Ow, it kinda hurts, he muttered under his breath immediately after, pressing a hand to his shot thigh.

Spreading the suit for the short man so that he could put it on more easily, Johann said with sincerity, "Thank you. I will not lose."

"That goes without saying," Dario's lips parted in a big hearty grin. "I can't do anything. Giving me the win is your job."

Chapter 5

When the patient from the second floor declared briefly that he wanted an early discharge from hospital, Theo didn't protest. "Don't come crying to me if you reopen your wound," was all he said. General treatment of Dario's wounds seemed to have been over though.

Nicolas who had Nina examine the leg wound Johann gave him stood up. Nina peered at him with worried eyes, but didn't say anything. Nicolas waved a hand at her and walked over to Worick, taking a spot by his side.

When they left the clinic, Worick dropped by the first bar he could find and bought a bottle of whiskey and 2 shot glasses. "We're not a tableware shop," the bartender grumbled, and Worick stuffed two bills into his breast pocket to placate him.

Next, the Benriya headed to the familiar back street garbage dump site. The stench it emitted was familiar as well, although weaker and thus more tolerable, probably due to yesterday's rain dampening the worst of it.

There was only one tattered couch in sight — the same one Johann collapsed on the other day. When Worick ran a checking finger over it, it didn't feel too unclean, so he sat down on it and lifted his gaze to look at his partner.

Said partner let out a big yawn, raised an eyebrow and surveyed their surroundings with disdain.

'Why a garbage dump? It stinks to high heaven here.'
"We'd be the ones in trouble if we bothered neighbors and earned their anger."
'Having to wait is more troublesome. We could just fight near the clinic.'
"And what if you wrecked its walls? We'd have to pay for repairing them.
Besides, we can't involve Nina-chan in this."
'Hah,' Nicolas grimaced and produced a case with Celebrer. It still had quite a lot of its contents left, and Nicolas threw all of it into his mouth. The case, now empty, then got launched into a pile of trash.

That dose was clearly too much, but Worick didn't even try to lecture his

partner for it.

It wasn't like he wasn't concerned. But a part of him found it very much agreeable every time Nicolas was being reckless, pushing himself too far like that, and not even Worick himself could quite make sense of those feelings. Right now, he would deal with that duality by making a small meaningless talk.

"It's promising to be an intense night."

'We're just taking care of a couple of strays, is all.'

"But they're pretty capable strays."

'Thankfully.'

Nicolas lightly tapped the toe of his left foot on the ground a few times. His recovery rate may have been exceptionally high, but there was no way his injury could have already healed completely. At the very least, that timid Tag was strong enough to wound Nicolas, one of his own kind. The dose of the drug that his partner took might as well have been Nicolas giving due credit to the boy's ability.

That said, Worick wasn't worried.

"I'm counting on you, partner."

'Leave it to me, partner.'

Nicolas' eyes narrowed, becoming sharp. That expression could also be interpreted as a smile, with enough desire. Before long, Worick's ears, too, registered the sound of two sets of footsteps.

Dario made his grand entrance with a high held head, chest thrown out and hands in his pockets. Although he dragged his injured leg slightly, he didn't let the pain show on his face. Right behind him, like a shadow, Johann quietly walked.

Dario approached the couch, sitting down next to Worick.

"Well, ain't it a good couch, eh. Too good for throwing in garbage."

"Yeah. And I got us some good booze to go with it."

"That so. Then it's gonna be a good night. There's booze, there's gambling and there's a friend. Nothing else to wish for."

"I'm jealous of how inexpensive your wishes are. I'm a little greedier, myself."

It had been long since for Worick the word dream had started to associate only with nightmares, and the word hope he would rather not hear or utter if he could help it. But still, he had yet to give up on the wish to see his tomorrow begin in peace.

Handing one of the shot glasses over to Dario, he held up a black bottle. Its glass reflected the distant city lights, dying them cheap darkish red. The city that was a big garbage dump itself seemed to shine so beautifully to the observer watching it from a real garbage dump. Old Parr was 12 year old. It was Worick's favorite, and Dario previously commented it was good, too.

Worick poured half a glass for both of them.

"Your treat?"

"Yeah. I wanna make you memorize what good booze tastes like."

"What, no ice?"

"Don't you know? Shot glasses are special glasses for drinking good whiskey straight."

"You sure know a lot."

"It's just that you know nothing."

Heh, Dario snorted. Snatching the shot glass, he dipped a finger in it and licked the droplet off the tip.

"What are we toasting to?"

"Whatever you want, I don't really care. It's not like we had any special cause before either."

"No, tonight's circumstances are different. It's a big moment for my kid brother where he'll go wild for my sake. No any other cause can make a drink taste better."

"I feel for Johann-chan's trouble. Better be careful not to get yourself too drunk and cause him even more trouble."

"Being troubled over his big brother is the kid brother's job. Ah, right, let's do it this way then." Dario wasn't drunk yet, but his whole face lit up as he declared without a shred of embarrassment or competitiveness, "For our victory."

Worick's mouth curved a little. This man really lacked taste, painfully so. But pointing out every single instance was just too much trouble.

"Alright, we'll go with that, too."

The two glasses came in contact, knocking against each other lightly and producing jingling surprisingly clear for articles that cheap.

Only, the clanking of clashing blades that filled the space directly after drowned out that clear sound all too fast.

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Nicolas couldn't suppress the smirk. Not that he tried in the first place.

Holding up slightly the tags hanging from his neck, he showed them to Johann. The ranking category etched on them read A/0 — the two characters that were synonymous with Grim Reaper for most.

'Did your big brother provide you with diapers?'

Johann didn't understand Nicolas' words and otherwise showed no signs of caring, as if he didn't understand the meaning of the characters on the tags the same way the rest of the world did.

He, too, held up his tags. They read B/1. A valuable rank considered high, but a whole ranking category below Nicolas'.

"A fight to death is no card game. And Ace is not always necessarily stronger," Johann said with a smile.

Nicolas read his lips but didn't reply. So long as he had a confirmation that the opponent was done with his preparations, no talk was needed anymore.

Johann quietly closed his eyes. The moment he did, it was as if even the scenery that Nicolas was seeing turned several shades darker. The dark-haired man raised his eyes to look at the sky, covered with heavy clouds. But he couldn't care less if it was. Star-gazing wasn't something that held any appeal to him.

On the edge of his vision, Worick and Dario clanged their glasses together.

It probably wasn't like it was the starting signal or anything, but Johann made a sweep with his hand, as if wanting to tear through the space. And he actually did. The blade of a throwing knife was fast approaching. By the time he consciously perceived it, Nicolas' body was already moving, his katana repelling

the knife and sending it flying off course. Nicolas could tell that a blade meeting a blade produced a high-pitched metallic clang — he didn't hear that sound of pure murder but felt it with his skin.

'Not half-bad, eh.'

Ranking categories were an index assigned to Twilights by Normals for controlling and managing them. Like Johann said, they weren't a failproof indicator of real strength. It was just a number assigned based on one's results. If the outcome of any clash could be determined beyond any doubt just by looking at the opponents' ranks, all fights would be settled peacefully with just the display of tags. It would be incredibly boring.

'Don't go down too easily, okay? Let me have my fun.'

Nicolas broke into a run. The distance between him and Johann was 7 yards. Traversing it in the time it took to draw a quick breath, he brought down his high held katana. Like a greeting to a friend from the same town he unexpectedly met in a strange foreign land. The point of the sword tore Johann's oversized down coat on its descend, and the fluff went flying around. On the other side of the white cloud fluttering in the air, the young man smiled, as if he enjoyed the touch of bloodlust he had experienced a moment ago. The two of them were similar on a level much deeper than superficial classifiers like ranking categories, Nicolas confirmed and the thought made him grin back.

—Yeah, we're something totally different from humans, he pondered. Was it his self-derision talking? No. It was just the truth, simple as that. Twilight were kept by humans as pets, while keeping inside themselves a beast.

Johann shrugged off his down coat and tossed it aside. Throwing knives, combat knives, several handguns, wires, explosives — all kinds of items that were murderous intent given shape were wound around his slender body.

Yet, what drew eye about him was not them but his right arm. It was bony and covered in many wrinkles, like that of an old man. One glance was enough to know that it was the form his compensation took. There was no way that arm could muster any notable strength. Still stronger than a Normal's though, of course.

That right arm of an old man moved with speed that left Nicolas' perception ability wanting and made him wonder what it even was made of. The point of the combat knife enclosed, only 2 inches short of Nicolas' right eyeball. With the back of his katana's blade, he held it off. Instincts drove him to protect himself and to kill the enemy. Having his brain simply faithfully follow his instincts was enough.

Nicolas switched his grip, holding his katana with his left hand only, and grabbed the combat knife that his katana was currently keeping back, with his right. He cut his fingers a little when doing so but couldn't bring himself to care. When Nicolas twisted the combat knife in Johann's grip, the youth immediately let go of it, his body smoothly diving down like he tried to slip into a hole in the ground. By that moment, he had already drawn a gun with his left hand. Nicolas plunged the knife he had just snatched from the enemy into the gun's barrel. Johann pulled the trigger unfalteringly. Naturally, the gun misfired. Johann rolled across the ground, Nicolas chasing him. Neither knew where the bullet went. For the time being, it was only clear that it didn't hit either of them. The ruined gun tumbled down onto the concrete, blanketed with rubbish.

Nicolas was aware that his opponent had mastered quite a few weapons and for his part, he wanted to make the youth unleash all of them on him, to be exposed to every available type of murderous urge. He would smash all of them to pieces and only then bury his own blade in the guy's chest, that's what his wish was.

On the ground, there lay a car's left door thrown away for garbage by someone, and Johann bumped into it as he rolled, movement stopping, smoothly whipping out his still childish looking left arm and pointing it at Nicolas. Bloodlust this time took form of a needle fired from some crafty rig. With no way to dodge it, Nicolas had to let it sink into his left shoulder. Not letting it slow him down, the man tried to stomp on Johann, intending to crush him underfoot. Johann jumped low but long as if sliding, securing a position behind Nicolas. The older man promptly turned around as to not lose sight of him and the same instance sensed something coming from behind him. The car's door that Johann bumped into a few seconds ago was now flying at Nicolas. Johann must have pulled it with his wire. Catching it with his left hand,

Nicolas threw it at Johann.

Johann deftly slipped through the hole gaping where the window's glass pane used to be, fast approaching Nicolas, swinging a second combat knife at him as he was. Aiming to hack the knife in two, Nicolas raised his katana high overhead before delivering a blow. As a result, contrary to his original plan, it was Johann who was put on the defensive, having to block the blade with his knife. Due to the kickback, he had to leap high into the air again to escape. Nicolas gave chase, jumping after him.

The youth was about to fire a needle from his left arm again. Striking his left shoulder with considerable force, Nicolas disturbed his aim and derailed the needle off its intended trajectory. He overtook Johann midair. Johann was holding a handgun. Eyes still closed, his lips were curved up in a smile. It wasn't even bloodthirst. Just genuine joy, like he was having a ball. Glad that the mad dog before him was smiling, Nicolas, spinning in midair, took a swing at him, asking the youth in his heart not to die on him just yet as he did.

Just as Nicolas had hoped, Johann deftly caught the older man's blade with the gun. Not firing it, he released his grip on it and launched a knife. But Nicolas had already seen through him. The gun Johann let go of was free-falling along with the two of them. Nicolas caught it and threw it at the knife headed for him. The gun grazed it, and that was enough to alter its path, sending it into the dark night sky fruitlessly.

When the two landed back on the filthy ground, they ended up about 7 yards apart again, facing each other, Johann with his eyes still closed, Nicolas pressing a hand to his damaged left shoulder and smirking ferociously.

His sneer not letting up in the least, Nicolas pulled out the needle that made a spot of red blossom out on his shoulder, with a violent jerk. Bending his finger, he then launched the needle into space, the tiny metallic stick hitting a steel plank the original shape of which was impossible to guess and falling to the ground harmlessly. Nicolas' five senses were clear. He could even feel with his skin the soft ching the needle produced upon the impact. This place was dirty, mixing garbage and blood together. The stench was awful but the place itself felt comfortable.

Johann opened his mouth — not to talk but to let loose a war cry.

—So you get it, too, don't ya, kid.

There was no need for words in a fight between beasts. Or for breaks, for that matter.

That's how a real fight between Twilights ought to be. If their twilight was soon to change into eternal night, they had only the now to play to their heart's content. You can still go on, right? 'Cause we're not nearly done here, yet. Show me your next way to kill.

The corners of the two's lips lifted up even higher, as they kicked the ground, looking positively like a pair of savage beasts.

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Watching the two beasts unleashing their instincts to play with each other with murderous innocence, Worick and Dario sipped Old Parr.

"How nice. They look like they're having fun," Dario commented.

Worick only nodded in reply. The necklace intended for women dug into his skin, making it itch, and he raised a hand to his neck.

—Was this what Sophia wanted? he contemplated, fingering the faint scars found there.

No, this couldn't be it. Except at the same time, he couldn't get rid of the feeling that this was one of the possibilities she foresaw. At the very least, she knew that Johann would come to this city, searching for her. And to her, the play to unfold then was not a happy one but a tragedy, through and through, Worick was sure.

Just as he thought this, Dario spoke up.

"Y'know, in the end, Johann just can't live without depending on his little sis."

Worick didn't believe that Dario could possibly be smart enough to see through him and surmise what he was thinking; the short man didn't even try in the first place. What he said just happened to echo the words floating in Worick's own mind, was all. There was nothing strange about it, Worick felt.

The blond Benriya poured more of Old Parr into Dario's shot glass. Dario accepted the bottle from him and took his turn to fill Worick's glass.

"You see," he continued cheerfully, "he probably didn't really understand why he even lives in this world. So he made his sister his one and only reason. Only so long as he lives for his sister that he can feel that he really lives, I think. That's why he's having fun right now."

Sophia had to be aware of that, too, Worick was convinced. She had to know that to Johann, she was his everything. That's why she had placed such a request with them at the very end.

—Hide me for 3 more years.

It was for Johann that she went to the trouble to ask that. Her beloved big brother was the person that she desperately wanted to hide her tattered body and her death from. Just like her own flesh, Johann's body wouldn't hold out much longer. 3 years should be enough, she must have estimated.

That's how she probably lived all her life since being little, taking it upon herself to give her brother whatever meager hope she could, and going even as far as to hide her own compensation from him. Desperately trying to preserve her brother's illusion and keep it pretty.

And that's why Johann was able to fight right now, throwing his life away for his little sister. That's why he was able to shed blood with a smile on his face.

Worick felt that a cheap necklace was a fair price for the request tasking the Benriya with protecting the kind lie of a little sister created for her big brother. On the other hand, he also felt that being saddled with arranging the conclusion of two lives was too heavy a burden to carry.

He lit up a Pall Mall.

"So what about you, personally?"

"Huh?"

"How well did you know Sophia?"

Dario scratched his head. "It ain't cool to talk about others' women. Praise her or diss her, nothing good'll come out of it either way."

Dario stuck a Garam between his lips. Worrick moved to light it with his Zippo. Sweet-smelling tendrils of smoke, spewed from the tip, started creeping about, spreading out.

Dario was a strange man. Resorting to cheap cliched descriptors, he could be characterized as unfathomable. There was no way he was smart enough to know everything, but just like his little brother said, evidently the man lived his life always being able to somehow determine the right option to take, if just narrowly. Perhaps, it could be said that rather than remember so many things, it was better to forget most of them. Yeah, that just might be right, Worick reflected.

Someone once said that having many talents was more dangerous than having none. Worick couldn't forget anything, and way too many women took a liking to his talent of sorts — his fine hair. How many things had he missed out on because of that? He wished he could say with conviction that all of those things were something unnecessary to him, but his only eye could not record and store something that it had not once seen.

"You said you can tell the smell of misfortune."

"Yeah, I sure can. That's how I lived my life."

"Can you smell it now?"

"Nope, none at all. Booze, smoke, blood and the godawful stench of garbage. That's all. The usual crappy peaceful odor."

"I see."

It appeared that Dario really didn't feel a sliver of uneasiness or anxiety, being no different from how he was all the other times he and Worick drank together. Did he believe Johann would win? Or...

Worick had to smile at the thought. Giving the man more depth than there was was no use. He would only set himself up for something absurd and equally stupid if he did.

Dario took a drag out of his Garam, then took a sip of his Old Parr. Repeating the process a few times, he finally said, "Speaking of women, in the past, I drew a picture together with a gorgeous woman. It was an awesome picture, too, of a grinning dog."

"I know. You drew it on the hood of your Fiat."

"Don't remember where I drew it. How come you know though?"

"I heard from you. Time and time again. And I even saw it."

"That so. Anyways, she was one fine woman."

How does it feel to forget, Worick suddenly wanted to ask badly, but limited himself to only an ambiguous smile in the end.

He kinda liked Dario. If only they had met under different circumstances... but there was no use to think about those ifs. In this city, every and all meetings always spelt trouble.

Worick recalled Sophia again.

For his tastes, she was neither pretty nor charming. She put up a cool aloof facade, but it was only skin-deep as she dreamed like a little girl even when her body was falling apart; she talked like she believed in nothing, yet a little kindness was all it took for her to trust a man. She was the type of woman you could find everywhere dime a dozen. But at least, she knew her womanly ways. At parting, a true woman was to leave trouble after herself. And fulfilling the wish of a dying woman made on her deathbed was the worst kind of trouble of all.

Fulfilling that wish would be beyond his powers to begin with if he was on his own, Worick whispered in his heart. Exhaling smoke, he focused his gaze on the two locked in an intense battle.

Luckily, Sophia entrusted her entreaty not simply to Worick alone but to the Benriya as a whole. It required no romantic-flavored pity or kindness. She never sought those to begin with. All that was requested was to accurately fulfill the wish, in just moderation.

And if he was allowed to involve the both halves of the Benriya in this matter, then Worick had just the man he could trust above all and who always did a job so perfect that it was almost offensive.

For the man in question, too, having any sort of personal feelings towards the client was resolutely out of question. It was a job, and that was all the reason he needed to act. Said man didn't even harbor human-like sentiments towards Worick himself, the blond was sure, being a creature that followed a simple rule

demanding him to obey his contract holder. And he was not happy or sad about it. Nicolas Brown truly was an ideal partner for Worick Arcangelo.

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Raw pain felt pleasant, making Johann smile a big smile.

It took him back to when he was kept by Gummy. He didn't have a single good memory about that period, but it was then that he had learned to enjoy this. For Sophia, for Sophia, he kept repeating to himself while destroying everything in sight. Only when doing that Johann felt redeemed.

If there was salvation to be found anywhere in his dirt-filled life not much different from that of a starved stray dog groveling in the dirt of a garbage dump as it waited for its death to come, it lay only in those moments. In the moments when he could be free. That was the only time when hope was born, hope for his beloved little sister that gave him hope as well.

Johann's eyes were closed. He didn't need his vision to fight.

For Johann, his sense of smell provided him with exceedingly more information than his eyesight ever could. Smells covered everything that needed to be covered, and he could detect where the enemy was hiding and what was happening behind, above and below him, from smells alone. Smells were what told him the level of his opponent's fatigue or how close to death they were.

The Twilight he was presently dealing with was a deviation from the norm. He was stronger than anyone Johann had ever met. His physique was by no means big, but his body was covered with thoroughly tempered muscle — heavy, tough and elastic. Being lighter, Johann won in speed. And thanks to diversity of his weapons, the distant fight advantage was on his side as well. But his opponent had him beat in everything else. The youth couldn't hope to best him in power or experience or raw madness.

Johann could readily see himself crushed by the man facing him. It was disturbingly easy to imagine the man's katana take Johann's head clean off his shoulders and pierce deep into his chest.

In contrast, he couldn't picture himself winning. Knives and bullets would

simply get repelled. And even if some of them happened to hit their target, that powerful body wouldn't stop. Wire would be cut up, the hidden weapons would deal no more damage than a gentle breeze, and everything about him would be dismissed.

—Even so, the winner would be himself.

Johann knew the smell of blood, as well as the smell of killing. He had absolute faith in his nose. Additionally, he also had Dario on his side. The man was powerless, but picturing him die was even farther beyond Johann's imagination than conjuring such an image for the muscular Twilight before him. As long as Johann, with his ability to smell blood, was with Dario who could tell the scent of fortune and misfortune, they wouldn't lose to anyone, ever.

The terrifying smell of the terrifying Nicolas was getting closer. His sweat was infused with vitality. His left calf and left shoulder had the scent of blood on them. The wound on his leg definitely wasn't anything light, at that. The area was sweating profusely and had a heightened temperature. But the man didn't seem to be concerned about it in the slightest. The mass of muscle bounced, and the iron scent drew closer.

Johann pulled at the wire wound about his left arm. Damp stench of a musty wooden closet swollen with moisture hit Nicolas from the side. But apparently, the man could actually see the thin wire even in the dark of night. Carefully measuring out the applied power, Johann severed the wire. The crash happened right next to Johann's ear, but he paid it no heed, moving on to launch his next attack.

Leaping into his opponent's chest, he made a slash at the man's throat with his combat knife. Nicolas dived down at the same time, evading and making one wonder just what kind of insane reflexes he possessed. Except, being able to perceive even flexing of muscle, Johann knew he would. Letting go of the knife, he aimed a handgun clasped in his other hand down at the man's face. Shockingly enough, instead of pulling away, Nicolas willingly moved even closer to the gun. With the hilt of his katana that he now was forced to hold almost flat against his body, he struck at the handgun. Johann pulled the trigger. From the gun's barrel pointed downward a single round launched. The explosive bang hit them both from below.

He picked up the wrong option. He knew it in his head. He shouldn't have fired. He was well aware that his aim was off, after all. Even if it was less than a second, his mistake wasted it in vain and gave his opponent an edge. If this man moved closer to the gun muzzle on purpose to make Johann slip up and buy himself that momentous opening, then he truly was a monster. A split second error in timing it — and he would have died on the spot with a bullet lodged right between his eyes. Was it his way of saying that he was deaf even to the footfall of Death's approach?

What came assaulting Johann in the fleeting second snatched from him was not the katana or the fist or even the sole of the man's boot. A forehead hard as rock crashed into Johann's nose, sending a shower of sparks blossoming on the backdrop of his closed eyelids. To kill the momentum, Johann allowed himself to fall backwards. His head was thrown back, chin pointing towards the sky, but he knew that his knife was at his feet, bouncing on the concrete flooring. Grabbing its hilt in midair, he drove it up, intending to bury it in the neck in front of him from below.

The monster effortlessly blocked it with the base of his katana's handle. Johann sensed that the muscle in the man's both arm was swelling with even more power. Unable to resist, the knife got ripped out of Johann's hand, the hilt of the katana sinking into his cheekbone on the sheer momentum. Johann still had the gun gripped in his left hand. Not hesitating, he fired it pretty much point-blank. Nicolas reacted immediately, twisting away. The bullet still grazed his left side, but the wound wasn't fatal. Not even deep enough to call it serious. And the man still took a step forward, the smell of his blood getting heavier.

There was no way something like that could stop the monster, and to prove it, he brought his katana down on the fallen Johann laying on the ground. Still, Johann was able to roll away somehow, avoiding the blow, maybe because having to dodge the bullet earlier put the man off balance. Johann tried to use the momentum of his rolling escape to snatch the knife that got ripped out of his grip earlier, but it went without saying that Nicolas, with his both feet firmly planted on the ground, had all the advantage he could want.

Johann scattered a handful of iron tubes as he rolled across the ground. Those

were an unstable imitation of hand grenade, but this time they worked as they were supposed to, detonating. Using the sound of explosion that hurt his ears as a cue, Johann sprang up back to his feet, firing his gun at random to give himself cover. For a split second, his sense of smell got overwhelmed and Johann lost the grasp on Nicolas' position. It wouldn't be strange if that moment became his last, but somehow he managed to stay alive through it as he picked up his knife.

Dario was clapping and rejoicing on the sidelines, the showy blast uplifting his mood, perhaps.

Johann's sense of smell was back and, following the man's scent, he readied his knife, facing in the man's direction and feeling relieved inside.

—Yes, luck was on his side.

He was still alive even after such a violent clash with a monster. His body still moved. The tubes blew up closer to Johann than Nicolas, but it looked like Nicolas had suffered more damage from the rubble the explosion scattered than Johann. In the first place, the very fact that that defective junk detonated at all was luck at work. If not for that, his head would already be rolling, neatly separated from his body. It just so happened that most of the wounds Johann had inflicted upon Nicolas in the course of the two's confrontations until now were on the other Twilight's left side. Johann was aware that Nicolas was left-handed and knew first-hand how taxing it was to fight when one's body balance was crippled like that.

Were all those coincidences due to Dario's power, too? Although the man sure reeked bad for being the living incarnation of Lady Luck. But at least, the short man's nose picked up that Johann would be able to beat this monster tonight. That had to be why he gave Johann permission to attack Nicolas in the first place.

Johann's nose that had taken a headbutt from Nicolas and the cheek that had been dealt a blow with the hilt of the older man's katana throbbed painfully. The youth was used to ignoring pain, but he felt a little sick, perhaps due to the blows to the head giving him a brain concussion. Would he able to counter the monster's attacks like he was doing until now like this? Contrary to Johann's

fears though, Nicolas still didn't move from the spot he had taken after putting a bit of distance between them. He was simply smirking, and nothing else. The youth's intuition told him that the man was letting him catch his breath. That leniency and self-confidence the man displayed could probably be regarded as a stroke of luck for Johann, too.

Johann accepted what he was offered and took a breath. Opening his eyes, he found that the night was unexpectedly radiant. Through a tear in the clouds moonlight shot, like an arrow released from a bow. Not even Johann knew what moonlight smelled like.

Nicolas beckoned him with his index finger.

—Ready yet? If you are, bring it.

That was what was said to him, the youth knew.

And indeed, his head was clearer, the shock from the impacts on his brain having mostly eased. The scent of gunpowder in the air somewhat abated, too, allowing for easier transmission of information on smells.

At the end, for a very short while, Johann's eyes darted towards the tattered couch. What they focused on was not Dario, however, but the man next to him, sipping whiskey with a superficial smile on his lips.

Worick. From his neck, there hanged that familiar wing-shaped necklace.

Johann didn't doubt that Sophia would never part with that necklace, much less give it to anyone, no matter who, willingly. Actually, her scent coming from that necklace was weak.

For a split second, Johann's murderous impulse flared up, with the blond man as its target.

But he couldn't get his priorities backwards, here. The monster before him came first. The stench of bloodlust coming from in front of him was terribly overpowering.

And a dog headed to its destination guided by its nose, after all.

*

Worick knew the implications when Johann's eyes met his. And of course he

felt the youth's murderous intent that was directed at him.

He even gave a whistle at that. Being glared at by a Twilight was helluva scary, he confirmed for himself yet again.

"You known him long?"

When asked, Dario let his Garam that had burned up to the filter drop to the ground by his feet and cocked his head to the side.

"No, not really. A year or two. Ask him for details."

"Oh, that's a surprise. I was under the impression that you've been hanging out together for 10-something years or so."

"You see, with him, it's like he was born just yesterday, 'cause he never saw remotely human treatment when he was growing up. When he finds someone to hold a decent conversation with, he gets attached to them."

"What about you?"

"Hn?"

"You seem to dote on Johann-chan quite a bit. Why?"

Worick fully expected Dario to just say he had forgot why in reply. Whether it was true or a lie, the short man would just halfheartedly evade the question, he thought.

But Dario didn't.

"Do you really need a reason to be friends?"

"It's not about if you need a reason or not. There has to be something."

"Maybe." Dario put Old Parr to his lips. "Here, there, everywhere stupid shitty fools are doing stupid rotten things. And I got fed up with it all. Know the feeling?"

"Can't say I do."

"Better if you don't. Anyways, when you hungry, you wanna fill your belly, right? And then the opposite, when you've eaten your fill, you wanna admire guys who are hungry."

Worick didn't understand what Dario wanted to say by that. He could probably easily chime in, saying he shared Dario's sentiment, but he had a feeling that this wasn't something he should treat frivolously and agree without meaning every word. Dario was talking about the reason why he had decided to

throw away his own life willingly, Worick was sure.

"Why have you gotten sated?"

"I can't remember why very well. My head is great, you see, it forgets all the trifles stupid things."

"Yeah. It's one of your few in number special talents."

"I know, right? You've no idea how convenient it is."

"But also can be inconvenient."

"I ask my kid brother at times like that."

"You two sure mesh well."

"That's how partnership works."

Worick gulped down what was left in his shot glass, and Dario poured him more. The Old Parr bottle was already about half empty.

Taking a sip out of his own glass, Dario smiled. "This booze sure is yummy. And it's such a nice night tonight. Perfectly suited both for drinking with a friend and for parting with a friend," he said.

It was directly after that that blood spilled and sprayed before the two's eyes.

*

When Johann took off his eyes of the necklace and refocused them on Nicolas, the man showed an expression like that of disappointment, almost like the happy smile he wore before was but a lie.

Instinctively, Johann knew the reason. It was because his murderous impulse was diverted away from the monster in front of him, if only for a second. The man was probably reproving Johann's halfheartedness.

—I'm sorry for that, Nicolas, Johann apologized in his heart.

Sorry for spoiling your fun. Sorry for not being a true unmixed beast like you.

—But I have my own joy and happiness.

Sophia. Just the fact of her existence was enough to make Johann feel content.

Johann kept squeezing the trigger of his handgun until the magazine was empty. One round grazed Nicolas' shoulder lightly, but the rest he dodged or

repelled with his blade. The same instance Johann was finished firing the last bullet, he threw two knives, then dashed forward himself, following them.

Out of his weapons, he only had one combat knife and one wire left on him.

Closing his eyes, he simply ran.

—Need to purify my desire to kill, he tried to persuade himself.

Like the knife he launched, like the bullet he fired. Like the monster in front. His next slash would inflict a fatal wound, he believed.

He would kill the man. He would kill him, without fail. He would kill him with his next slashing attack. He would forget about Sophia for just those few moments. He would surrender himself to the undiluted madness for just a split second, like the monster in front. And a single finely honed slash would become the killing drive incarnate.

—If he could just make himself believe it...

Nicolas dodged the two knives thrown at him and, facing the opponent head on, readied his katana.

—If Johann could just make himself believe it, he would be able to make even this monster fall silent forever.

There was a wire attached to one of the thrown knives. When it unwound to its full length, Johann hauled it back in. A sound of the air being rend asunder came from behind Nicolas.

—I'm the pure killing intent personified.

Only, that killing intent was fake. If that monster had a working sense of hearing, he might have noticed that much. But he was staring only at Johann. He didn't even smirk anymore. Johann knew it even with his eyes closed. The next thing he did was to try and stab the approaching monster with his combat knife imbued with the fake murderous impulse. The monster swung his katana.

Directly following the two blades clashing, the thin knife pierced into the man's back from behind, just like Johann had envisioned it.

Nicolas' katana lost some of the power behind it, and Johann outmaneuvered it with his combat knife. The tip of the knife was about to tear the man's throat

open, the youth knew.

Only, immediately after he had confirmed it, his knife plunged into something that was more meaty than a throat had any right to be. Nicolas, with one knife already sticking out of his back, whipped up his right arm to let the combat knife sink into it.

—Ah.

This was what a true monster was like, huh. Being stabbed from behind didn't stop him, and neither did being stabbed from the front. The true madness not abating any no matter how much he bled.

Johann tried to pull out his combat knife out of the flesh it pierced all the way to the bone. It didn't budge, however. The tough stiff muscle held it captive, the youth realized. Could not be helped then. Johann let go of his last remaining weapon.

Balling his right old man's hand into a fist, he punched the knife, spreading the bloody smell, on the handle. The force of the impact recoiled back into his fist. He did train to fight hand-to-hand, but the shock made his wrist bend and throb in pain. Next, he tried to do the same with his left childish arm. But the man caught it with his bleeding right hand and crushed the youth's hand in his grip.

From the intense pain, Johann's eyes opened. In his field of vision, blurry with tears, he saw the monster smiling.

"Wit' DIs, I dESTroYEd eveRYt'INg."

This was the first time the youth had heard the monster's voice.

He didn't understand what the man said.

What he did realize was that the katana was lodged in his own neck, and from there a spray of blood was gushing forth. But he couldn't feel the smell of it anymore.

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From Johann's broken fallen body, dark blood was streaming, spreading on the ground.

With that much, even Worick could smell it, now. It was not a pleasant scent.

Nicolas, who gave his everything to the game, was leaning against a wall, catching his breath. From his right arm stabbed with a blade at the end, blood was dripping. He overdid it, Worick wanted to chide him, he clearly could have won with less sacrifices on his part. But his partner had this bad habit of accommodating his opponents a little too much.

Sipping his whiskey, Dario gazed at what had been Johann only a few seconds ago. No matter how Worick searched his face, he didn't find signs of sadness in it. If anything, there was even a cheerful smile on his lips.

Taking note of the other man's empty glass, Worick asked, "Need a refill?"

Dario shook his head. "Nah, don't wanna have to take a leak."

"The night has only just begun."

"I've already had my fill of fun for tonight."

"I see."

Worick wanted to talk to this man for just a little longer but was hard pressed to find a suitable conversation topic.

Taking out his Colt Government, he pushed it against Dario's temple.

"Do you remember what our bets were?"

"No. I already forgot," Dario said, corners of his lips lifting in a smile. "I'll ask Johann on the other side. He's very capable, you see."

"Take care of him. He's too good a little brother for someone like you."

"Yeah. You said it."

Dario glanced at the Garam box but it was already empty. Only the faint sweet smell still hung in the air, and even that was already dissipating. Worick offered him his Pall Mall, but the short man declined with the palm of his hand.

"See ya, my friend. This is a good night to bid farewell."

"Bye-bye, my friend. Say hi for me to your little brother and that stylish vivid violet car."

Worick pulled the trigger.

A bang, stupidly loud, echoed.

It resembled this man's voice, just a little.

Worick returned the Colt Government to its holster, then put a hand over the half-open eyes, as if in a smile, of the man laying collapsed on the couch and closed the lids. Good night was the words that you were supposed to say to a lady. "Well done," Worick whispered instead, but there was no answer.

He downed what Old Parr was left in his shot glass in one gulp. Lighting up a Pall Mall, he puffed out a cloud of smoke and closed his eyes.

Dario remained an elusive man till the very end. At the very least, he was no friend. Still, Worick wished they could have had a drink together one more time. And that he could have sat in the passenger seat of that violet monstrosity just once more. Or that Dario would call him friend once again. He really needed to put an end to this train of thought.

When Worick opened his eyes, he saw Nicolas walking up closer.

'Over?' his hands signed, and Worick nodded.
"Yeah, both, more or less."

The requests of a dead woman and of a mafia organization, and with this, both of them were done and over with.

Worick got up from the couch and crossed to Johann. Standing over him, the blond gazed down at his face. The youth's expression wasn't nearly as bitter as Worick had expected. He looked like a sleeping child watching a dream.

Taking off the necklace too tight for his neck, Worick squatted by Johann and put it into the young man's hand, closing his fingers around it. Did he really risk his life for something as petty as a wing on a chain? The moon was finally out, showing through tears in the clouds, but the cheap thing didn't even glitter properly in the moonlight.

'Isn't that supposed to be the pay?' Nicolas pointed out disinterestedly with a sweep of his hand.

"But of course," Worick nodded. "Except with this cute girly item lying around in our house, I'll get fewer job requests for my main occupation. It's a cheap article, it's not worth the trouble."

'So what, we worked for free then, huh?'

"You reap what you sow, remember? That's why some nights are like this, partner."

Nicolas grimaced with distaste at Worick's nonchalant words, but didn't really look especially discontent. To him, some necklace was something he couldn't care less about from the start, probably.

In the small city of Ergastulum, surrounded with walls on all sides, all you needed to do to run into trouble was take a few steps. Whether the fact was fortunate or unfortunate, no one cared. This time they just happened to draw the short straw, was all.

Worick didn't possess a nose capable of telling the smell of good fortune, after all. "Tough luck," he shrugged his shoulders and plastered his usual well-worn business smile on his face.

Epilogue

Trouble remained troublesome to the last, and, like in some kind of a vicious circle, trouble called even more trouble. In other words, the Benriya still had to deal with the two dead bodies. Such was the promise they had made with the Monroe family.

That said, they couldn't possibly haul the corpses with their throat or head dyed in conspicuous red on their backs to their office.

For the time being, Worick sat back on the couch where the nice guy, his suit rearranged to be even more gaudy, slept, and downed what was left in the whiskey bottle. About the time he was finished emptying his shot glass, a single car stopped at the entrance to the garbage dump. It was nighttime and this was a godforsaken back alley. Worick had already guessed from the engine sound that was all too audible in silence that the car was an old-fashioned sedan.

The city's cleaning crew had arrived.

The old garbage collector got out of the car and, thrusting one hand in his pocket, started on his brazen approach. Worick, having put the glass on the armrest, got up to welcome him with a smile.

"Well, well, Chad-san, working overtime can't be good for your old bones."
"You're the last bastard I wanna hear that from. Damn, whose fault d'you think it is?"
"Oh, I wouldn't know. At the very least, not mine. Besides, Chad-san, we can't really let you clean up these particular bodies."

They were clamoring a little louder than what your usual expressions of thugs' tough love sounded, so Worick had fully expected this old dog with a perfectly working nose to show up here. He had an ulterior motive for hoping for the inspector's arrival, that being his wanting to push the troublesome chore of reporting what happened on the old man.

Chad shrugged his shoulders.

"Has to do with the Monroe family, right? I was told to give you best regards."

"I see. Great timing then. These are the presents to Monroe-san. Can I trouble you to wrap them up in gift wrapping?"

When Worick asked that, Chad put a hand on his hip and made a face of utter annoyance.

"Please, papa."

"Shut up, damn brat."

'Please, papa.'

Chad whipped around, to find Nicolas sticking out his tongue, which prompted the good inspector launch his clenched fist at the Twilight. Nicolas nimbly sidestepped it, but hastily put his hands up when he saw that Chad took out a revolver from his breast pocket.

The inspector breathed out a long heavy sigh.

"I've already made arrangements for packing up this parcel. In a few minutes, a cute subordinate of mine with bags under his eyes will arrive."

"That's good to hear. Your capable newbies have it rough, as always."

"None of them has any balls, I gotta say. In fact, they change so frequently that I've no time to memorize their names."

'That must be your age taking toll though? You should consider retiring asap.'

Chad glared daggers at Nicolas, but made no move to administer a physical rebuke this time. Instead, he opted to survey the two dead bodies, shifting his gaze from one to the other.

"2 presents, I take it?"

"Yeah. Since they're gifts to Monroe-san, be sure to wrap them up in something suitably stylish."

"Shuddup," Chad spat out. "If you're so concerned about appearances, first do something about those outrageous stripes. He'd look better in the nude than in those."

Finished, Chad returned to his car.

Worick smiled lopsidedly and waved his hand, "True, that."

On the way back, Worick left Nicolas in Theo's clinic and collected the two's belongings, as well as the violets that were put into the flower vase. Nina's

expression turned troubled, but she didn't ask anything. Yes, she really was a good smart girl who would become a great woman one day. In exchange for the violets, Worick handed her some eustomas that he had bought on the way. He had a feeling that presenting her flowers sold in the middle of the night could drag her worth down, but Nina took them with a sincere smile on her face.

Next day, Worick got a call from Chad, informing him that the wrapping of two presents had been over and that he was expected to enclose a card and send them to the addressee already. Worick added the two's belongings and enclosed the violets he took from the sickroom, wrapping them as prettily as he could. Miles, who came to fetch the package as the Monroe family's errand boy, threw a suspicious glance at the flowers but didn't dig, only saying, "Good job."

What kind of face Daniel Monroe would make when he learned that the objective of the mafia slayers was but one girl who was already dead, at that? Worick tried to imagine it but gave up with a wry smile for the meaninglessness of it.

To that man, this case was nothing special. The mafia killings had undermined the equilibrium somewhat, but it had already been fixed. And besides, truly wise men knew that hopeless fools did exist.

This city wasn't a place where a couple of dogs could really make a difference, in any case. That fact applied both to the two outsiders and to Worick and Nicolas.

Tags couldn't even count on an individual grave, only a random hole in the ground they would be thrown into carelessly in piles. It was all too likely that those two would share the same fate. That was the way to die they had chosen. Results-wise, the biggest difference their deaths were able to make was to usurp a few dozens of seconds of the news-time, and that was it.

In hindsight, for the Benriya, this whole affair wasn't a big deal.

They just lent their bed to a woman for only slightly longer than usual and then got to know a very strange duo for a very short time. One half of the duo, a man of small stature, hopelessly lacked taste and was prone to forgetting most things. The other half, a youth with a pretty face, was timid and knew

freedom, if only the tiniest bit. And that was all.

Worick could recall everything that happened to them to the last detail, but there was no deeper meaning to it. The layout of the furniture at the garbage dump and the value of information was still unchanged.

The air humidity levels got somewhat more tolerable though. A few more days, and the odor of the dogs would disappear.

With the money he had received from Miles as a pay, Worick bought another bundle of flowers. After only a short agonizing while, he picked pink tulips. A bit too childish, perhaps, but he had a feeling that the girl they were meant for would be happier to receive something like that. What's more, the tulips' quiet, docile fragrance was a good fit.

He laid those flowers at a public cemetery, with its murky puddles of still water here and there, just like in the back streets of this city. Closing his eyes, Worick recounted what became of the request, and with this, he was finally freed from this case.

He returned to the office with resolute determination not to move another muscle today.

First, he took a long shower, washing away the smells of blood, perfume, other things that he no longer could tell apart. When he exited the bathroom, the mirror reflected the scars below his neck. They were so thin and pale now that if one didn't know they were there, it was almost impossible to notice them, and in another week they would heal completely, disappearing without a trace.

Worick just finished wiping down his body and changing when the phone rang.

The blond Benriya left the house with quick strides, rolling up his sleeves as he went.

"Geez, we're still dead tired from yesterday's affair, for crying out loud, can't she show a little consideration?"

'Didn't you say no work today?' Next to him, Nicolas, thoroughly wrapped up in bandages, signed in displeasure with rough gestures of his hands.

"It's a request from Granny Joel. Can't have smokes prices skyrocket," Worick flashed a troubled smile.

'Not again.'

"Yeah, they just don't learn."

'I told you before, just let me loop off their limbs already.'

"Oh c'mon, don't be so eager. It's our valuable source of income, after all.

When we're done, let's go grab something yummy to eat."

'I have a better suggestion.'

"What is it?"

'Let me handle collecting the pay this time.'

With that, the corners of Nicolas' lips lifted up in a grin as he kicked off the ground powerfully, going on ahead with leaps far faster than the speed Worick could hope to keep up with.

"Ah! Hey, partner! Stealing a march on me again?! That's not cool!"

'You're just too slow. Don't rush it, just catch up whenever.'

Worick scratched his head and broke into a run, chasing Nicolas who looked like a child with his katana bobbing up and down with every jump.

En route, the edge of Worick's vision registered a glimpse of a skinny stray dog sitting in a back alley. The sight revived the picture on the hood of a too stylish car for a second.

Worick's head never forgot anything. He could remember in vivid details the comically exaggerated sneer on the face of the now destroyed dog, as well as the crooked smile of its owner flashed in his last moments. When he thought that those images would probably float in his mind's eye every time he saw a stray dog now, he smiled a tiny smile, as if prompted by them.